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FIGURE OF EIGHT

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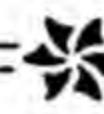
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FIGURE OF EIGHT

By

COMPTON MACKENZIE



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To
C. M.
from
C. M.

Dancers had gone, beauties had shrivelled ; but their ghosts haunted the shadowy interior. The silver-footed coryphées now kept lodging-houses ; the swan-like ballerinas wore elastic stockings ; but their absence was filled by others : they were as little missed as the wave that has broken.

—CARNIVAL

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PRELUDE

FIGURE OF EIGHT

PRELUDE

ON a June evening, just over a year before the War, seven of the eight girls in dressing-room No. 45 of the Orient Palace of Varieties were preparing themselves as rapidly as possible for their appearance in the ballet divertissement with which the performance opened. Conversation was by now restricted to demands for the help of Mrs. Pilkington, the stout elderly dresser, to mend this hole or sew that button on the scarlet blazers or white flannel trousers in which the first line of boys would presently make their first entrance as Henley oarsmen in *On the River*. The warm June dusk had kept everybody dallying by the shop windows of Regent Street or Shaftesbury Avenue or Leicester Square, and the boy had called the quarter of an hour some time ago.

“Here, wherever is Maudie Chapman?” asked Madge Wilson, a pretty round-faced girl with fluffy fair hair and hot blue eyes, the irises of which were ringed with a darker shade. “She’ll be off for our first dance if she doesn’t look sharp.”

At that moment in answer to the question the dressing-room door burst open and Maudie Chapman, puffing with the exertion of having run up eighty stone stairs without a rest, came hurrying in.

“Maudie,” her companions shrieked in chorus, “they’ll be calling the beginners in two twos! You *are* the limit, Maudie!”

"You'll be fined."

"You haven't half got a nerve coming in now."

But Maudie Chapman did not reply. She stood leaning against the wide deal board before which she should long ago have been sitting down on the deal form to dress, and shook her head hopelessly.

"What's the matter, Maudie Chapman? Are you canned?" asked Irene Dale, turning contemptuously toward the last comer those speedwell-blue eyes of hers in which ardour and a listless indifference were strangely mixed.

"No, I'm not canned," Maudie replied. "Only, as I was changing buses at Hyde Park Corner I suddenly remembered my Walter had told me to look in the paper and see if Queen Anne had won at Lingfield in the four o'clock race, because if it had he'd buy me that white sailor coat I was so struck on for Ivy, and before I could look where they put it in about the horses I read . . . oh, girls, Jenny's dead!" With this Maudie collapsed on the bench and, sprawling down across the long dressing-table, she buried her head in her arms to sob her surrender to grief.

"Jenny?" Irene Dale repeated sharply. "Not Jenny Pearl?"

Maudie looked up, her big nose seeming bigger than ever in the glisten of tears, her hat awry on her black frizzy hair.

"Jenny Pearl," she repeated. "Jenny Pearl of course."

"But how came they to put in the papers about *her* dying?" Irene pressed.

"Because she was shot by that fellow she married."

"Do you mean murdered?"

"Well, you don't shoot anybody for fun. Of course she was murdered."

In the silence of horror that fell upon Room 45 the

sudden rap of the call-boy sounded like a message from the dead, and one or two of the girls gave muffled shrieks.

"Beginners, please—beginners, please . . . beginners, please . . . all down, ladies. . . ."

The shrill voice of the call-boy grew fainter along the whitewashed brick passages. Habit was stronger than emotion. The first line of boys in scarlet blazers and white flannel trousers and absurdly tilted straw hats moved in a body toward the door of the dressing-room.

"You aren't going to try and be on, Maudie?" a slim fair girl turned back in the doorway to ask anxiously.

"Oh, shut up, Gladys West," another slim, fair girl remonstrated. "What's the good in her trying to be on now for the first ballet? You *are* silly. If the management don't like it . . . well, you know what they can do." She made a ribald gesture with two fingers.

Gladys West flounced as much as it was possible to flounce in her oarsman's attire.

"I knew Jenny Pearl," she said pettishly. "And which you didn't, Lucy Arnold."

The emotion of the girls in Room 45 found relief in bickering or in communicating to girls in other dressing-rooms who were joining the descending stream the news of their former companion's death.

Only Irene Dale, sombre-eyed, went down to the stage in silence.

Up in the gaslit dressing-room, the solitary window of which was not thickly enough coated with dust to obscure entirely the glow of the June sunset, Mrs. Pilkington shuffled across to Maudie Chapman.

"Shall I go down to the canteen, dearie, and see if I can get a nice quartern of gin for you?"

"What good will gin do, Pilky?"

"What good does anything do if it comes to that?" the dresser retorted. "Life's such a shocking muddle that it's my belief Jenny Pearl's well out of it, and I wouldn't mind who heard me say so. Well, if you don't fancy a nice quartern of gin, what about a nice Guinness? Guinness never did nobody no harm."

But Maudie shook her head.

"It came as such a shock reading it like that, Pilky. Why, it seems only yesterday I was writing a letter to Jenny down in this place Cornwall and telling her about my Ivy, and Elsie Crauford's twins, and then I go and buy a paper—a thing I don't do once in donkey's years—and look to see if this horse Queen Anne has won the four o'clock at Lingfield and the first thing I read is 'Death of a London Dancer' and of course that took my eye and I read on a bit further and found it was Jenny who'd been shot by her husband. You never saw her Maurice, Pilky?"

"No, I only came to the Orient just before she left. After Mrs. Duggan died I came. But I remember you girls talking a lot about him. Didn't he do the dirty on her?"

"He went away, yes."

Mrs. Pilkington clicked her tongue.

"Aren't men beyond a joke? Well, I've been married twice not to mention being as good as married half a dozen times, and yet if you was to ask me what I thought about men I'd call the whole lot of them verming. Just verming, and that's talking straight. But what was you saying about this here Maurice of hers?"

"He was there when she was shot."

"How did they know he didn't shoot her himself?"

"What would he want to shoot her for?"

"What's anybody want to do anything for if it comes to that?"

"Well, I don't know how they knew, but they must have known it wasn't Maurice because it said in the paper about her husband being taken off by the police."

"The police, eh?" Mrs. Pilkington hemmed doubtfully. "Well, if I liked to tell the world what I know about the police. . . . Why, it's the limit the way the police 'll carry on. And if a poor girl stands up to them and spits in their eye, it's soliciting, if you please. There was a girl two doors from us in the Dials went out last thing to fetch her mother a jug of bitter—a jug of perfickly ordingary bitter, if you please—and the bluebottle on the beat. . . ."

"Oh, Pilky, don't go on," Maudie implored. "You'll send me loopy in a minute."

Mrs. Pilkington was not offended by the interruption. It was evident from Maudie's failure to listen to her anecdote about the girl in Seven Dials that she was seriously upset. Usually she was the best audience of the lot.

"Come on, duckie," she urged. "Why don't you get dressed and go on for the first change? It's no good moping up here by yourself. I'll help you with your things before the other terrors come off."

So Maudie dressed herself in the white tail suit which was supposed to mark the extreme dressiness of night on the river, and in which the first line of boys would dance their final number to the whirring reds and blues and greens of the firework display that would bring the ballet divertissement to a brilliant conclusion.

When this was over there would be a long interval before the ballet proper began, an interval filled in for the audience by jugglers, acrobats, musical acts, and perhaps some entertainer of international reputation. In these years immediately before the War the Orient provided for its patrons what was in essentials precisely the same entertainment it had been providing for a

generation. The success of the Russian Imperial Ballet at Covent Garden had for a while slightly shaken the complacency of the board of directors; but it was soon felt that the Orient could hold its own by importing a *prima ballerina assoluta* from Russia instead of relying on France or Italy as for so long. Yet somehow this simple solution did not work. Night after night the most comfortable stalls in London—stalls as individually wide and well-sprung as the armchairs of the clubmen who frequented them—grew emptier. Death and illness and age were telling upon the habitués of the older generation, and the younger men of the new generation were not taking their places. The promenade was still full enough; but the hobbled skirts of 1910 had cramped the style of peripatetic harlotry. Large hats, long trains, ample busts, sequins and silk petticoats gave the women of the Alhambra and Orient and Empire promenades that five-pound look which for thirty years had been accepted as the standard of a luxury article. When hobbled skirts came in they might as well have frequented the Leicester Lounge or one of the Cafés nearby: full-rigged whores were going the way of full-rigged ships: the promenade at the Orient was not what it was.

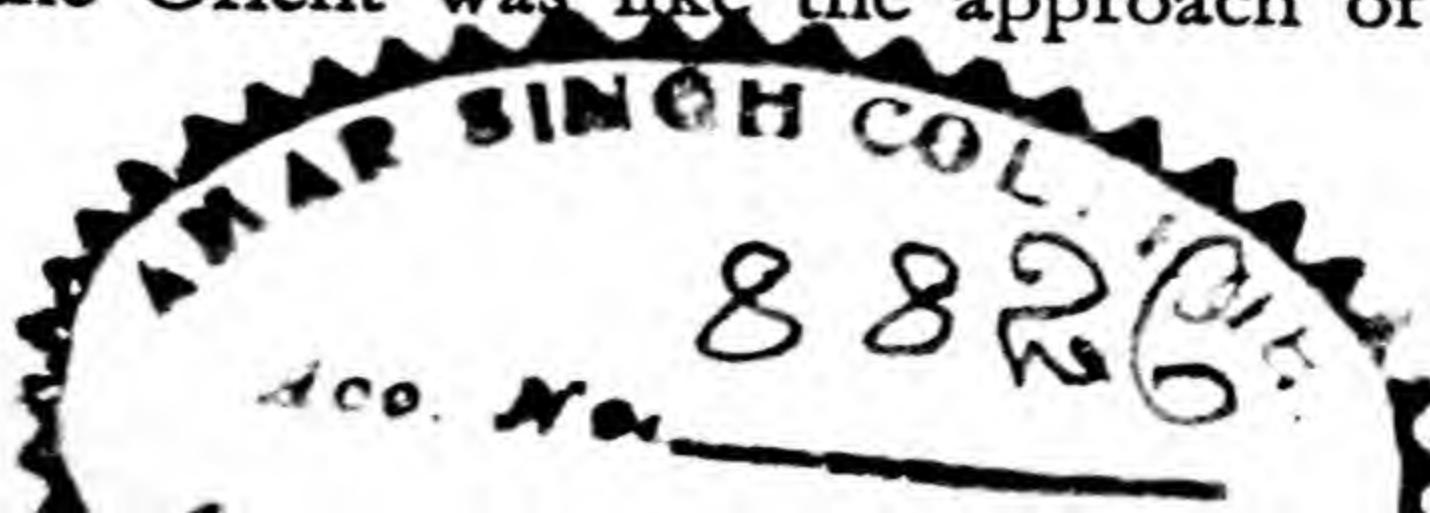
Old Mr. Moberley, the managing director, assured the members of the board, all elderly city men like himself, that he had spared nothing to make the new ballet a success, and his fellow directors looking at the costs of production and the salary list did not doubt it. Yet the ugly fact remained that the Orient was getting emptier and emptier, and that unless some way was discovered of winning back its audience the Orient would have to close its doors. The thought of that huge aggregation of domes and minarets and coloured tiles, which had been the most prominent feature of Piccadilly Circus for fifty years, standing dark and

desolate struck a chill even into the warm capon-lined paunches of the city fathers who were responsible for its management and maintenance. There must be some way of making the Orient prosperous again. Perhaps the public was tired of ballet. The director who first put forward that possibility was stared at by his colleagues. Nevertheless he had merely stated aloud what they were all wondering to themselves, and once the morbid doubt had been clothed in words the directors began to consider what should take the place of ballet. Revue seemed to offer the best chance; but there was one bold old gentleman who actually suggested turning the Orient into a cinema theatre.

"A cinema theatre?" exclaimed Mr. Moberley. "Good god, why not turn it into a kaleidoscope while you're about it? I've never been inside one of these so-called cinema theatres myself, but they tell me the craze is already showing signs of dying down. The five minutes we give them of the bioscope to let people get their coats on is all *our* audience wants of that kind of thing," Mr. Moberley concluded with a snort.

Nevertheless, as if the crimson and gold flock walls of the board-room had heard the secret, a rumour went round the theatre that the present ballet founded upon the novel *Aphrodite* by Pierre Loüys was to be the last of the long line of them and that the Orient would presently be closed, reconstructed, redecorated, and opened next autumn as a cinema theatre. To more than half the ladies of the corps de ballet who had danced at the Orient since they were almost children and whose mothers had danced there before them an announcement that the end of the world would succeed the run of *Aphrodite* would have been less alarming. To the majority of the dressers, many of whom had themselves danced once upon a time in the ballet, the rumour of the closing of the Orient was like the approach of death.

B



Scene-shifters, wardrobe-women, musicians, programme-girls, they all grew queasy at the notion. Every night they looked at the empty stalls with a growing sickness at the heart, so completely had everybody in that musty old warren of a theatre become identified with it. There had been new girls who had boasted openly that they had no intention of remaining long at the Orient; but somehow they always did remain. They might grumble at the fines, moan over the ill-lighted and ill-ventilated dressing-rooms, groan over the stone stairs up and down which they had to rush a dozen times every night, slang the quality of the food provided in the canteen, and denounce the disgracefully long hours they were kept waiting at rehearsals; but they always succumbed to the influence of the half grim, half kindly genius of the place. Girls who had come for one ballet had remained for twenty; and on the day the managing-director had patted their heads in fatherly fashion and told them that they were no longer young enough to stand the strain of the life of a ballet girl they had many of them burst into wild sobs and entreated him not to give them their notice unless he wished them to consider their life at an end. To such overwrought females Mr. Moberley had made a habit of offering as a prize to be attained in a few years' time the possibility of returning to the Orient, when there was a vacancy among the dressers. And the woman who had come to the Orient as a bright-eyed girl of eighteen would leave it at thirty-eight with the hope of coming back to it again at fifty as a blowsy bonneted Mrs. Pilkington.

On this fine evening the chief topic of conversation had once again been the rumour that the Orient was to be closed and the ballet disbanded. The news of the death of Jenny Pearl, one of the very few girls who had left the Orient of her own accord, seemed like an omen of what might happen to all of them if the theatre

in which they lived, laughed, ate, drank, undressed, dressed, danced and gossiped should close its doors upon them.

So during the interval between the two ballets when her companions talked about the dead dancer it was in the light of their own future compared with what now seemed the perfect security of a happy and humdrum past.

"I remember like as if it was last week the night Jenny told us she was going to be married," said Gladys West.

"It'll be three years ago this November," supplemented Maudie Chapman. "Because I married my Walter the Christmas after Jenny left, and Ivy was born the November after that and she'll be two next November."

"That's right," Lucy Arnold confirmed. "Because I first came to the Orient just before that Christmas, and I took Jenny Pearl's place."

"No, you didn't," Irene Dale contradicted, "you took Elsie Crauford's place."

"A lot you know about whose place I took," retorted Lucy. "You was away in Paris with your Danby when I came to the Orient and you wouldn't be here again now if Jenny Pearl hadn't have left."

Irene Dale crossed the floor of the dressing-room, a threat louring in her blue eyes.

"I've stood enough from you, Lucy Arnold. Because you look like a bad imitation of Jenny Pearl you needn't think you *are* Jenny Pearl. You needn't think you can talk like *her* and get away with it. I've had it in my mind for a long time to jolly well punch into you, and I'll . . ."

But before she could strike, two or three of the girls caught hold of Irene and pulled her back to her own place.

"Shut up, Ireen Dale," said Maudie. "What a time to start in quarrelling about Jenny! And you shut up too, Lucy Arnold."

Madge Wilson and a lissom gypsy-faced girl with short curly hair, called Queenie Danvers, were inclined to encourage the fight, but the majority for peace was too large, and they were disappointed of their excitement.

"I remember when we were all standing by the stage-door and waving good-bye to her as she ran down the court into Jermyn Street," said Gladys West, "she turned round and called back, 'see you all soon,' and we never have seen her, and now we'll never see her. She was a lad. When I think of all the girls in the Orient there has never been one like Jenny Pearl. There was something about her none of us have got."

"Speak for yourself, Gladys West," Madge Wilson snapped resentfully. "Because you tagged round after her like a pet dog that doesn't say we all did."

"You did, Madge Wilson," said Maudie Chapman fiercely, "until she found out what a two-faced thing you was and told you off properly in front of the whole dressing-room."

Rita Vitali, who was the oldest of the girls in the first line of boys, a lovely creature with the oval face and full curved lips and the dark sleek parted hair of some Victorian figure of romance, spoke next in her gentle voice:

"I remember just about a week before Jenny left she came out to tea with us at Golders Green, and she said without thinking that my poor old man is twenty-five years older than me, 'Don't you think I'm mad, Rita, to marry this back number of *Comic Cuts*?' and then she said, 'Oo-er! I forgot about your Edward,' and I remember poor old Edward patted her on the shoulder the way he does with me sometimes when I get nervy and said, 'Rita will tell you that it is better to be an old

man's darling than a young man's slave,' and then Jenny and I looked at one another and giggled, and you know poor old Edward always thinks when anybody giggles that he's made a mistake in his English, and which always makes him ratty, because he never started to learn English till he came here from France after he was thirty and he does make very strange mistakes still sometimes."

"I think he speaks English marvellously," declared Margery Seymour, a small round-headed, heavy-browed, and deedy girl whose extremely genteel accent was something of a trial to the rest of the first line of boys.

"Edward'll be quate all rate noo," murmured Lucy Arnold. "Tell him when you go home to-night, Rita, that Mrs. Shakespeare thinks his English is quate too marvellous for words."

"You are rude, Lucy Arnold," Margery Seymour pouted.

"I can be, ducky," said the other meaningly.

Rita's gentle voice interrupted the threatened demonstration by Lucy.

"And after I got back from the theatre that night Edward said to me that although he spoke to Jenny like that he didn't really think she was very happy. He's funny that way, Edward. Anybody to look at him pottering about in that garden of his would think he was just mouldering away in the sun. And yet he's very cute really. And on the way to the station that night Jenny said to me she wouldn't so much mind being married if she could have two baby girls like me. And then she talked for a bit about her Maurice, but only as far as Hampstead because after that the Tube makes too much noise to talk properly. Poor kid! Still, perhaps she's happier where she is. I wonder where we shall all be this time next year."

"You'll be quite all right, Rita, even if the Orient does give up ballet," said Queenie Danvers, with a hint

of envy in her brittle voice. "You haven't got to look after a father who was once a dancer at the top of the bill till he got a double rupture and cracked half his bones. Your Edward can earn enough to keep you whether you dance or don't."

"Yes, but not enough to give my little girls the chance to do what I never did."

"You've done well enough, Rita," Margery Seymour burst in eagerly. "Look at the times you've gone on in *Aphrodite* as understudy. I only wish I could have a chance to dance even one *pas seul*."

"Good thing for Pavlova you haven't," put in Lucy Arnold.

Margery tossed her head.

"Well, I hope they won't close," said Maudie Chapman. "Because although my Walter has been earning good money all this year he likes his flutter, and it's always a relief to know there's two pounds waiting for you on Friday night."

"Bertold told me unless business improved this would be the last ballet the Orient would ever put on, and he knows," Madge Wilson announced.

The other girls could scarcely believe that the dark and insignificant little Jew who called for Madge Wilson every night after the show really did possess the influence upon the future destiny of the Orient that she attributed to him. Yet the lie, if lie it was, had been kept up for a long time now, and there was no doubt that Bertold had been seen actually talking to Mr. Moberley. Was it possible that the Orient was in such a bad financial way that those dignified old gentlemen who appeared at final rehearsals like the gentry at a school treat and who used to come up on the stage and pat the cheeks of the girls in so fatherly a fashion were prepared to accept the help of a Bertold to extricate themselves?

"And he said that if they put on a revue next

autumn he's going to see I get a part," Madge continued.

The other girls were silent. Madge might be boasting without any foundation, but somehow it did not sound like boasting. And if it were the truth, and she were really to become a personage of influence in the affairs of the theatre, it would be wiser not to make an enemy of her by expressing disbelief beforehand—Jenny Pearl, they were thinking, would not have been silent. She would not have cared to what extent Madge Wilson's influence might spread. Yet Jenny Pearl with all her self-confidence had made a mess of her short life.

"I can't hardly fancy that Jenny really is dead," said Maudie Chapman, voicing with her own thoughts so exactly the thoughts of nearly every girl in the room that there was no awareness how in doing so she had changed the topic.

"Nor can I," Gladys West agreed eagerly. "It almost seems as if she'd just gone down to the canteen and would be back in a minute to dress for the second ballet."

"Time you terrors was all thinking of dressing yourselves," Mrs. Pilkington put in. "But that's the way with the whole lot of you. Leave everything to the last minute and then expeck me to have eight pair of hands to stitch you together. Look at this choonic of yours, Queenie Danvers."

She held up the flame-coloured garment of a young Alexandrian which had been slit right down the back.

"I caught it on a nail in the wings, Pilky."

"That doesn't help me to sew it together. Good sakes, it's little enough the management let you wear in this ballet. You might make the most of what you have got on."

In those days it was still possible to make an audience gasp at the daring semi-nudity of the rank and file in a

spectacle. Fleshings were still the rule, bare legs the exception. It was not until the rise in the price of all materials that theatrical managers generally took advantage of post-war exhibitionism to save money on tights and stockings. The city fathers who managed the Orient must not be accused of cheeseparing when they sent their girls before the footlights so flimsily clad: their motive in doing so was dictated entirely by a belief that their patrons enjoyed staring through opera glasses at feminine beauty and grace in the buff.

The ballet of *Aphrodite* offered the most generous display of the buff yet seen in London, and the contempt of the city fathers for a generation whose pulses apparently could not be stirred by it was scathing.

“Good gad,” exclaimed Mr. Moberley, “when I think of the fuss Mrs. Ormiston Chant made about the tableaux vivants at the Empire and look at what the Orient is giving them to-day. . . .”

He broke off in pathetic bewilderment.

“Nation’s going to the dogs,” observed one of his fellow directors.

“No red blood left,” said another. “They talk about a big European war. Heaven help us if the country has to depend on the young men of to-day!”

The first line of boys changed five times during the second ballet. Each change involved running up and down the eighty stone steps to the dressing-room. They were grateful to the management for giving them so little to wear. When they had been bullfighters in a ballet founded on *Carmen* or macaronis in a ballet founded upon *Manon Lescaut* those ascents and descents had been much more fatiguing. Nevertheless, when the evening came to end they were all utterly tired by so much expense of energy in the languorous air of a London June; and fatigue on top of the atmosphere of uncertainty in the theatre and the reminder of mortality from

the violent death of Jenny Pearl made their dressing after the curtain had fallen a much more sedate affair than it usually was.

The final touch of gloom to the evening looked like being provided by Miss Chibbett, whose arrival on treasury night portended a determined effort to recover some of the instalments owing to her. Room 45 was the last one she visited, and girls there had been supposing themselves safe for another week when she walked in about five minutes after the fall of the curtain.

Miss Chibbett was a spinster who peddled clothes at various theatres to the stage doors to which her insinuating leanness had secured her an unobtrusive entry. She was a perfect example of that peculiar desiccation which dressmaking above all other occupations is liable to effect in the female form. Some of the clothes she sold were made by herself, but the greater part of her trade consisted of judicious buying in cheap obscure markets and selling on the instalment system. She had a weakness for warm sweetened gin, and it was the habit of her clients to play upon this weakness in order to gain an extension of credit. So Miss Chibbett's visits in search of funds were more welcome when the canteen was still open, for it was usually possible with the aid of two or three quarterns of mother's ruin to make Miss Chibbett forget her dunning mission and reduce her to a condition of maundering reminiscence. This evening, however, necessity had given Miss Chibbett the strength to resist hospitality and when she reached Room 45 she was still as bright and sharp as one of her own needles.

"Now, girls, I hope you've all got something for poor Chibbett to-night. Ireen Dale, you promised me last week when you was behind with your half-crown for that dustcoat I let you have so cheap that you would let me have next week's instalment in advance together with this week's and the one I let you off last week."

"Yes, then you woke up," Irene muttered sulkily.

"Well, reelly, if you aren't the limit . . . and I let you have it dirt cheap . . . you girls can't expect me to give you your clothes in a present . . . what about something on account from you, Queenie Danvers?"

"I can't manage even a sixpence this week. I had to pay them in the canteen. You can't pay all London out of twenty-five shillings a week," said the gypsy-faced girl resentfully.

"You should have thought of that when you bought that check coat from me last Febuary. You promised to pay me within two months, and Febuary to June is four months, and you haven't yet paid me the quarter."

"Oh well, rats, I can't pay you anything this week. So don't keep on keeping on," Queenie grumbled.

"What a time to come and ask poor girls for money," put in Gladys West. "You are unreasonable, Chibs."

"You come round here with your bits and pieces," Lucy Arnold added, "and nag us till we buy something from you for a quiet life, and then you start nagging worse than ever to be paid. What a liberty!"

"Well, anyone's got to live, haven't they?" Miss Chibbett asked of the room, and receiving no answer from anybody in it she pressed Mrs. Pilkington for an answer. "Isn't that right, Mrs. Pilkington? I said, 'anyone's got to live, haven't they?'"

"That's just the mistake they all make," the dresser replied grimly. "People's always thinking they've got to live, but if they made up their minds to do the other thing it's my opinion we should all be happier. There's too many people knocking around. It's becoming chronic."

Mrs. Pilkington had produced ten children, eight of whom were living. She was that type of blowsy, beery fertility which London displays in greater perfec-

tion than any city. Miss Chibbett except in age (they were both fifty) was the negative of Mrs. Pilkington. Miss Chibbett was the *ne ultra ultra* of desiccated virginity. The bulk of one of Mrs. Pilkington's sacklike breasts if suitably disposed about Miss Chibbett's bones would have made her plump, so slight was the framework of her body. Mrs. Pilkington's nose was flat and wide: her lips in that crimson face made that face look as if it had burst like an overripe fruit: her hands were like steaks: her chin was imbedded in her neck. Miss Chibbett's nose was sharp as a paper-knife: her lips were like a thread of faded silk: her hands were thin and restless, the fingers like knitting-needles, the wrists like old reels: between her chin and her neck was a high frilled collar long enough to cover a hambone. There was something ludicrously inappropriate in their respective attitudes toward life.

"I don't agree with you, Mrs. Pilkington. I like to see plenty of people. It's so good for business."

"That's as may be," retorted the dresser. "But don't forget there's many a person as don't do no good to no business till they dies. That is of course if they're inshawed for a good funeral."

"Oh, shut up, Pilky, always joring about funerals," said Maudie Chapman. "And to-night of all nights when we've just heard about Jenny Pearl."

"Oh, girls, I know, what a shocking thing!" Miss Chibbett exclaimed, emotion sibilant among her large teeth. "Well, a week before she went off and married that farmer fellow I read the cards for her and I tell you it took me all my time to hide what I saw. What cards, girls! And you know, Jenny was always very sharp. 'I thought the ace of spades upside down meant death?' she said to me. And I said, 'Oh no, dear, not the way I put them out. Just a slight disappointment, that's all. Cut again twice with the left hand, please.'

Acc w/o 8'8" 2-6

And up the ace of spades came again with the king of spades on one side and the jack of hearts on the other. Well, it reelly gave me quite a nasty turn, because nobody likes to see evil in the future quite so plain as all that. I had just such a nasty turn the day before my poor old dad tripped over the mat in our kitching and caught his head against the range and never spoke again. 'Come on, dad,' I said to him, laughing, because he thought fortune-telling all my eye. 'Come on,' I said, 'it's Tuesday afternoon. I'll read your cup for you.' And didn't I wish I hadn't! Four skulls, girls, and a whole skelington, as plain round his cup as I see you here to-night. 'Well, Selina,' he said to me, 'am I going to kick the bucket to-morrow?' You know: he was always a jolly-spoken man. Always very breezy. Well, there was I looking at those skulls in the tea-leaves, and I said, 'Oh, dad, of course not! What a thing to say!' And before tea-time came round again he was gone. So when they told me in Room 39 about Jenny Pearl being shot like that by her husband, and her Maurice there all the while, you can fancy what I was feeling, remembering about the ace of spades between the king of spades and the jack of hearts twice running."

Miss Chibbett's story thrilled the dressing-room. Every one of the girls who owed her money (and that was every one of them except Rita Vitali) was impelled to reconsider her refusal to pay any of the instalments owing to her.

"All right, I'll let you have a ready and willing on account," Irene Dale offered.

"Here's my two shillings for last week," Margery Seymour added.

"I can't give you more than sixpence," said Maudie Chapman. "But if you let me have that musling hat for my Ivy next week I'll give you more then."

"Have you got change for a halfpenny, Chibbs?" asked Lucy Arnold.

"Change for a halfpenny?" echoed the little woman. "Whatever next will you ask, Lucy Arnold? And you still owing me fifteen shillings for that very hat you're wearing."

"No, without a joke, read the cards for me to-night like a duck, and I'll give you half a dollar. I mean it. I'm not kidding you."

"Whatever next?" Mrs. Pilkington protested at this point in astonished indignation. "You don't think I'm going to sit here and wait after the show while you eight terrors has your fortunes told?"

"I wouldn't tell any fortunes to-night," Miss Chibbett declared firmly. "Not if you was all to pay me right up to date I wouldn't. And in fact after the turn I had hearing about Jenny Pearl it'll take something ever to make me read the cards again. I've never read anyone's cup not since that afternoon I saw my old dad's death in his."

"Oh, come on, Chibbs, be a sport," Lucy Arnold persisted.

But the little woman was firm in her refusal.

"I'm not going to read the cards to-night not for nobody," she declared. "And what's more I'm going straight home now, because I've just remembered I may have put the wrong washer in my mother's hot-water-bottle before I came out this evening. And if I have, the poor old thing's bed will be in a proper mess. Well, I'll be round on Tuesday, girls, and do try and let me have a bit more than you have been lately, because if I can't get in the money I can't buy the stuff, and you're the first to grumble if you don't see something fresh every time I come round."

With this Miss Chibbett slipped from the room, and a minute or two later might have been seen hurrying

along through the crowds of Coventry Street to her home in that slightly sinister little blind square between Great Windmill Street and Rupert Street which was called Ramillies Place on one side of the narrow entrance, Ramilies Place on the other. The blind square has vanished now. Its fusty rooms and creaking staircases were swallowed up in the eruption of the Lyons Corner House. At this date most of the houses were seedy and raffish hotels kept by Italian waiters and more often used for amorous assignations than honest lodging. The house of which Miss Chibbett and her mother occupied the upper half was owned by a maker of masonic jewellery called Justican, a large solemn red-faced man with an excessively waxed black moustache and a head of excessively smooth and sparse black hair which made the top of it look like music paper. Mr. Justican's lifelong association with masonry had superimposed upon his prosaic exterior an air of confidential responsibility, and Miss Chibbett never put her key in the latch of the door without bringing her landlord's face to peer out over the dusty screen of his workroom window in case it were an intruder upon the sanctities of his trade. Even when she came back late from her round of the theatres Mr. Justican's head always appeared round the door of his sitting-room at the end of the front passage in order to tell her in a portentously deep voice that he was waiting to draw the bolts. This watchdog regularity of his gave Miss Chibbett a most comfortable sense of security. The consciousness of Mr. Justican pervading the lower part of the house squeezed into a corner of the blind square excluded the dark fancies which afflicted the minds of so many lonely women in London. The imagination of robbery with violence, of ravishment and murder, melted like mists before the sun at the thought of Mr. Justican downstairs. Even the dread of fire did not dismay Miss Chibbett. There

was Mr. Justican downstairs to smell burning and deal with the cause of it long before the first evil wisp of smoke should penetrate into the bedroom she had shared with her old mother ever since they had moved to these rooms after the death of Mr. Chibbett.

This evening, as she scurried through the crowds of Coventry Street like a weevil making its way through thick grass, Miss Chibbett was worrying so much about the washer of that hot-water-bottle that by the time she turned aside into the quiet of the square her anxious mind had reached far beyond wrong washers to the possibility of finding her mother dead. Not even the presence of Mr. Justican downstairs could have averted that calamity.

"Mother hasn't called down nor nothing?" she asked as the landlord's head appeared as usual round the corner of his sitting-room to proclaim his intention of making all fast for the night.

"No, I've heard nothing. Were you expecting her to call down?"

"Oh no, indeed, no . . . but I always begin to fret a little when I'm late like this. I've been round to the Orient to-night."

Mr. Justican growled.

"If they don't look out, they'll get themselves into trouble at that place," he announced ponderously. "I took the chance when my brother Fred was staying up with us to leave the house for an evening and I took Mrs. J. to see the Orient ballet. Well, Mrs. J. and me just looked at one another! Just sat and looked. We were fairly disgusted, Miss Chibbett. Why, savages would wear more than those girls were allowed to wear. 'Well, there's a limit to everything,' Mrs. J. commented to me, 'but this is beyond the limit.' And mind you, Mrs. J. is no spoilsport. Not her. She likes her paddle at Ramsgate

when we take our ten days in August, provided that is of course the water isn't too cold. She finds it hurts her varicose veins if the water's too cold. Oh yes, Miss Chibbett, Mrs. J.'s game to lift her petticoats say up to the knee and, you know, think nothing of it. But the Orient was too much for her. Too much altogether."

Miss Chibbett was in such a twitteration to get upstairs and relieve her anxiety about her mother that she could not appreciate this colloquy with her landlord as much as she would have appreciated it on most evenings.

"Good night, Mr. Justican. Summer does seem to have arrived at last, doesn't it?"

Miss Chibbett hurried up the narrow panelled staircase, but on the landing outside the bedroom she paused, once again apprehensive. She bent low with her ear to the keyhole. She could hear not a sound from within. In her nervousness she felt inclined to call down over the bannisters to where the bulky shape of Mr. Justican was moving slowly about the entrance hall at his nightly task of making the house safe for its inmates. Then with an effort of will she turned the handle and went into the bedroom.

"Ah, there you are, dear," observed Mrs. Chibbett placidly.

The old lady, wrapped in a Paisley shawl, was sitting up in bed at her favourite pastime of reading about eligible public-houses in the *Morning Advertiser*. For years Mrs. Chibbett's castles in Spain had been public-houses to let.

"The washer, mother! Did your bottle leak?"

"I don't know, Selina. I pushed it out of bed a few minutes after you went out. It's too warm for a bottle to-night. I was thinking we ought to see about a bit of green for the window-box. Otherwise summer will be gone before we know it's here. Well, how did you get on to-night?"

"Three pounds five and fourpence halfpenny. I'd have managed more, only they've had bad news at the Orient."

"Not closing down right away?" asked the old lady, who was extremely well up in the current gossip behind the scenes.

"No, it's Jenny Pearl."

"Yes, I remember her. She came round here more than once to look over your stock. Didn't she go off and get married somewhere down in the country?"

"Yes, she married a farmer in Cornwall. And now she's dead."

"Dear, dear, what a pity."

"Murdered," Miss Chibbett announced bleakly.

"Good gracious. . . . Well, that's something that never happened to me in all my life. I've never yet known a person who was murdered."

"It's in the paper to-night. Her husband shot her."

The old lady clicked her tongue.

"Tut-tut, what some people get up to in this world."

"And I read the cards for her just before she got married. And I saw death in them just the way it happened."

By now Miss Chibbett was convinced of this. Thus do marvels grow.

"I wish you wouldn't mess about with them cards, Selina. If you hadn't started in reading your poor old dad's cup he might have been alive now."

"All the girls in Jenny's old dressing-room wanted me to read the cards for them to-night. And which I wouldn't. Though if I had have, I daresay I could have collected another pound of what was owing to me."

"You did quite right. You don't want to get all your customers murdered."

"What about your gruel, mother? Shall I light the gas-ring?"

"Grool?" repeated the old lady indignantly. "You come in here on a hot summer's night and tell me about a murder, and then you expect me to lap up a lot of grool? No such a thing, I'll take a nice glass of gin and water with a drop of peppermint and not too much water, so as I won't get the heartburn. Those chitterlings we had with our tea returned very persistent for a long time after you went out. And if you take my advice you'll mix yourself a glass of gin too. You've had a shock, Selina. Anyone can see that, and I've always said if anyone's had anything in the way of a shock there's nothing like a drop of gin to damp down the nerves. Murdered, eh?" the old lady continued in a meditative tone of grim relish. "Well, it's to be hoped you won't go getting yourself murdered, Selina."

"Oh, mother, what a thing to suggest," gasped poor Miss Chibbett. "What would anybody want to murder me for?"

"Your money," declared the old lady without a moment's hesitation. "If they got to know you often came back by yourself at night with sometimes as much as ten pounds on you in gold and silver I wouldn't put it past anybody not to catch you a bang on the back of your head as you was putting the key in the door. Look at Jack the Ripper," went on the old lady, who by now was sipping her gin with considerable gusto. "Don't tell me Jack the Ripper could slice up a woman in a public thoroughfare under the eyes of the whole force as you might say and get away, and somebody couldn't catch you a good whopper of a bang on the back of your head in a quiet place like this and snatch your bag as easy as winking."

"But a bang on the head mightn't kill me," said Miss Chibbett tremulously.

"It *mightn't*, that's quite correct," her mother agreed warmly. "But then again it *might*. Anyway, if you

take my advice you'll always look round over your shoulder before you start fidgeting with your latchkey."

"I've always felt so safe, with Mr. Justican about," Miss Chibbett lamented.

"Oh, I'm not saying you *will* be murdered," her mother allowed. "All I'm saying is you might be. Well, I'm bound to admit I thoroughly enjoyed that drop of gin. Enjoyed it thoroughly I did. And you put in just the right amount of peppermint. Hark!"

"Oh, mother, what is it?" the timorous Selina squeaked. "They're not breaking into the house, are they?"

The old lady uttered a scornful exclamation.

"Breaking into the house! I wanted to know whether it was your stomach or mine as was rumbling. Well, get on and undress now, because I'm going to turn over and go to sleep. Pull back the curtains and open the window at the top before you get into bed. Fifty-two years ago this month I married your father. And I carried a bouquet of pinks. Lovely they smelt. If the flower-women in Piccadilly have any pinks to-morrow you can buy me a nice bunch. Once or twice this evening I took a fancy to have a good sniff at a bunch of pinks."

Miss Chibbett lay long awake beside her mother that night, watching the tawny stain upon the warm summer sky fade with the lightening of dawn. It was nearly as silent in the little bedroom at the back of this decrepit corner of London as if it were deep country. The traffic was no more than murmurous here. She had left a thin blue crocus of gas alight, for Miss Chibbett, notwithstanding the comfortable assurance of Mr. Justican's presence in the lower part of the house, feared the dark, and to-night she feared it more than ever. This jet of gas cast upon the ceiling an aqueous moon which quivered and trembled and sometimes doubled itself into

a shimmering figure of eight as the airs of the June night entered this little bedroom so full of furniture and clothes.

Miss Chibbett's world began to shrink to the semblance of that dim uncertain reflection as she pondered her future and the future of those with whom she was brought into contact. Who a few years ago could have anticipated such an end for Jenny Pearl? True, it had been foreshadowed by the cards, but by that time her fate was comparatively close at hand. If she had read the cards to-night for the girls in the dressing-room, would she have seen their future as clearly written? Every one of them at this moment was a step further upon her destiny than when she left the dressing-room in such a hurry. It was not much after midnight yet. The pubs were still open. Some of the girls would not yet be home. Rita Vitali would be in the Tube on the way to Golders Green. What was her future? Maudie Chapman was probably just now getting out of the Monster bus that dropped her in Pimlico near to where she lived. What was her future? She had noticed Gladys West's Baron waiting for her at the end of the Court which led up to the stage door from Jermyn Street. They would be riding back to Kensington together on an omnibus. Beyond Sloane Street by now, riding outside on the top this warm June night. And Queenie Danvers would be walking back through Bloomsbury, the way she always did. She must get that money out of Queenie Danvers. Queenie was a girl she did not trust. Would that nasty-looking Jewish fellow be taking Madge Wilson out to supper? She had noticed him walking up and down Jermyn Street, waiting. Margery Seymour? A consequential, self-important little hussy. What was she doing? And Lucy Arnold? There was something attractive about that girl. The other girls said she reminded them of Jenny Pearl. Yes, there *was* a look of poor Jenny about her. Would fortune be kinder to

her? She was not likely to be on her way home yet. She liked life too much, Lucy did. And Ireen Dale? Ireen had been Jenny Pearl's best friend once upon a time. Ireen had taken the news of her death hardly. She had noticed that. What was Ireen Dale doing at this moment? What would happen to Ireen Dale in the future? If she had read the cards for her, the future would certainly have been clear, for Ireen was strung up to-night, and it was when girls were strung up that the cards became really eloquent. Just doing them for a joke was silly. You couldn't tell anything. There had been some quarrel between Jenny Pearl and Ireen Dale. She had heard something about it in dressing-room gossip . . . Ireen Dale . . . a girl that frightened you sometimes . . . Ireen Dale. . . .

Drowsiness began at last to overtake Miss Chibbett. She fell asleep.

CHAPTER ONE

IRENE DALE

THAT night Irene Dale walked along the court from the stage door, alone. On her way down from Room 45 several girls from other dressing-rooms had tried to talk to her about Jenny Pearl; but she had been as insolent with them as she knew how, her blue eyes like stones, her chin thrust forward aggressively, her hands plunged deep into the big pockets of that unpaid-for dustcoat. She had been equally insolent with various male acquaintances waiting in the court or strolling up and down Jermyn Street at the end of it. Bertold, the mysterious friend of Madge Wilson, raised his hat. She stared directly at him and passed him by with a deliberate ignoring of the salute. His sallow face grew dusky. Good job if he did possess all this influence of which Madge boasted! Good job if he did get her the sack! That would wind things up for her once and for all at the Orient. It was time to cast off from this dog's island. Gladys West's Baron, a rotund little man with a moustache and imperial, was the next to greet her: him too she ignored. A couple of youths in evening dress spoke to her as she turned into Jermyn Street. Of their attempt to establish pour-parlers she disposed with a coarse monosyllable, and when one of them with a laugh said, "Manners! Manners, little girl," in chaffing remonstrance, she threw back over her shoulder an epithet which made him jib like a colt struck on the nose.

Irene was bound for Bob's. Bob's was a small and intimate public house situated in an alley between Charing

Cross Road and St. Martin's Lane, one of those alleys which debar all except foot traffic with a line of posts at either end and keep still an eighteenth-century air about them. On the first floor of Bob's was a room with a lobster-red wallpaper brilliantly lighted by an electrified cut-glass chandelier. The middle of it was occupied by a large oval mahogany table. Comfortable chairs and settees covered with red plush stood against the walls, which were hung with numerous mirrors and photographs of the minor Bohemian celebrities of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Among them was a framed certificate granting to Robert Bromage, F.O.S., a Sloperian fellowship on account of his services to good cheer, an honour which was awarded every week to some Bohemian personage by a now defunct comic paper called *Ally Sloper's Half-holiday*. "Bob" Bromage himself was a mammoth of a man in his mid-sixties, with a wife ten years younger but already seeming as large as himself—a genial woman with three tiers of chins between which the powder lingered like snow in upland furrows, and a convolved accumulation of canary-bright hair. "Bob" presided over the hospitality of the two bars on the ground floor. Mrs. "Bob" reigned in this lobster-red room, which was known as "upstairs at Bob's," and was to all intents a club to which nobody would have thought of penetrating without an invitation or an introduction.

Upstairs at Bob's had been a favourite resort of Irene and Jenny in the days when they had been inseparable friends; but until this evening Irene had not been near the place for over three years, and already so swiftly does the Bohemian scene change, it seemed full of strangers. Girls she did not know stared at her from calculating eyes. Chorus girls from the Hippodrome, thought Irene with the ballet-girl's scorn for such pretentious and incompetent amateurs.

"Hullo, Mrs. Bob, I haven't seen you for donkey's years," she said in greeting to the hostess, who like the room itself was unchanged.

"Good lord orlmighty, it's Ireen Dale!" she exclaimed in a rich Cockney contralto. "Where have you been all this time, little stranger? Well, I never! What are you going to have?")

"A Guinness, please, Mrs. Bob."

"You haven't changed your fancy. Touch the bell, there's a duck. Joe has been helping Bob downstairs. There's been quite a rush to-night. I don't know why, I'm shaw, because things have been very quiet up West lately. Very quiet they've been. And bring your chair alongside. I was just trying to get my books straight. You're looking at my specs? Yes, I've had to take to glass eyes at last. Well, we don't grow no younger, and that's a fact. Come to that, you're beginning to fill out yourself. You take the advice of one who knows, my girl, and watch out for your figure. I don't say you can slim yourself down to a rasher of wind and keep healthy. But you can always buy yourself good corsets. Look at me. Massive, yes. But plenty of shape, like St. Paul's. And good corsets done that for me. Ah, here's Joe. Joe, bring a nice bottle of Guinness on the house. You remember Ireen Dale, Joe?"

The waiter, a whiskered David Copperfield sort of a waiter, grinned.

"How are you, Miss? Your friend not with you to-night, then?"

"My friend?" Irene echoed nervously. Surely he could not be meaning Jenny Pearl after all this time?

"Yes, the one we used to call Laughing Eyes."

"Joe means young Jenny," put in Mrs. Bromage. "You're behind the times, Joe. She went off and got married."

"She's dead," said Irene in a colourless voice. "She was shot by the fellow she married. It was in the papers to-night."

"Well now, if that isn't what they call a regular coincident," the hostess declared. "Well, dear me, and if I wasn't reading either in the *Globe* or the *St. James's* or it may have been the *Pall Mall* about a London dancer being killed, and I passed the remark to Bob when I read it out that I wondered if she'd ever been a customer of ours. Of course I didn't reckonize her by her married name. Well, fancy that. What a shocking thing! Here, bring that Guinness quick, Joe," Mrs. Bromage turned compassionately to Irene. "You'll be feeling a bit downhearted, duckie; wouldn't you rather have a brandy?"

Irene shook her head.

"No, I'd rather have a Guinness."

Joe went off for it on tiptoe. It was the only way he could think of to show his respect for the dead.

"Well, you have given me a shock, Ireen," Mrs. Bromage continued, "and it will give Bob a shock when I tell him. Why, it seems only yesterday when you two was in here every night after the show. Then didn't she take up with some fellow? I don't mean the one she married."

"Yes, she was potty on a fellow. . . ."

Irene broke off. She was remembering an evening at Bob's with Jenny soon after she had first met Maurice Avery. They had argued about the possibility of real love, and Jenny had scoffed at her affair with Arthur Danby. It had been the beginning of the break up of their long friendship. She felt she could no longer sit in this red room which once had seemed the cosiest, jolliest place in London.

"Well, I must hop it, Mrs. Bob," she said when,

without savour, she had drunk the Guinness. "I'll come up and see you again soon when I'm feeling a bit more cheerful."

She hurried from the room, conscious as she passed across it of the inquisitive glances of the girls who now supposed that *they* owned Bob's. Stuck up set of mares! In the old days Jenny and she would have told off the lot of them. The old days. . . .

She caught a yellow Camden Town bus at the corner of Tottenham Court Road and took a seat inside. In the old days on such a night she would have sat on top with Jenny, and they would have laughed together all the way home. What a shocking mess the pair of them had made of things! Jenny had fancied love had come to her like love in some soppy book. All of a doodah she had been, trying to kid herself that because her Maurice talked as if every word was going to bite his tongue he wouldn't want to sleep with her the same as other men did. Arthur Danby and his brother Jack hadn't pretended, at any rate. There was no real call for Jenny to say what she did just because that night when she and her went out with Arthur and Jack Danby she had left Jenny to take her chance. There hadn't been any need for her to spend the night in that flat of Jack's in Westminster unless she wanted to. She had a will of her own. Many and many a time she had boasted that no man would put it across her unless she meant for him to. And next morning Jenny had come back in a rage and said she'd never stay with her in Camden Town again. She could hear Jenny's voice now. "Think what you will be one day—I know—a dirty old woman in a basement with a red petticoat and a halfpenny dip and a quartern of gin."

Irene shivered in spite of the warmth inside the bus. Suppose it were true? Suppose that was to be the end of her one day? She and Jenny had hardly spoken to

one another again, and then Jenny had gone off and married that country fellow with a voice like the milkman calling, and now he'd done her in. Now she was dead. Death? Did death hurt much? They said people who were going to die young saw what was coming to others. Would what Jenny said really be the end of her one day? She had had a good time with Arthur Danby while it lasted, and it had lasted many more years than Jenny's wonderful love affair with her Maurice. She had been eighteen when she first met her Danby, and because her mother dressed young Ethel in short skirts and long button boots he'd taken that fancy to dress her the same way. Of course, young Ethel had never grown up properly. She had still been a kid at sixteen. She was still a kid now if it came to that. Not all there. Of course, one had to pretend to other people that one's youngest sister was all there. But she was soft really. Why, Ethel was twenty-two now, and yet she still spent half the day playing with dolls. People had commented a lot when Danby had put herself into short skirts, but who cared, when he was sending her diamond rings and bracelets? Those presents of Danby had kept them all at home very comfortable. And any old way it was a good job she hadn't married him. What a bookshop he and his brother Jack kept in Paris! What books! Still she'd had good times with him there so long as he had still had money, and when the money was finished he'd paid her fare back that last time. Perhaps he'd make money again, and if he came back she'd marry him. If he came back? Irene shivered again. Somehow she did not think he ever would come back. And his brother Jack was dead of the consumption. Could it possibly be true that you went on living somewhere else when you were dead, the way people went on living when they moved from one part of London to another? What an unnatural idea! No end to it. Still, it was probably

just all talk. People had to talk about something. It was probably only a rumour.

The bus was nearing the Britannia. The conductor pulled the bell for Irene to alight, and a moment later she was hurrying away from the Hampstead Road up a dim quiet side street to Stacpoole Terrace.

Camden Town was one of the first attempts to create a *rus in urbe* when London began to make rapid growth at the close of the eighteenth century. Yet by the time Dickens came to live there as a boy, twenty-five years later, it was already squalid, and the gentility of retired professional men which had hoped to establish itself in Camden Town's new crescents and squares and terraces soon departed for more genteel surroundings. Nevertheless, even to-day those crescents and squares and terraces preserve a quaint distinction. The architecture may reflect the debased and exhausted taste of the eighteenth century, but it also reflects the design of a single architect, and this unity of conception has been enough to safeguard its character. No district of London is more unmistakably itself, and no streets contrive to suggest more plainly that they were built originally within a few minutes of green fields and woods and streams.

Few of the original Camden Town streets were as mean as Stacpoole Terrace. Yet the double line of slim stuccoed villas along which ran a series of dented and rusty Trafalgar balconies did at any rate possess a definite household quality, enabling the imaginative passer-by to speculate on the personality of each interior without being oppressed by the sense that every family was like the next, the impression which later town planning was to inflict so painfully over acres and acres of suburbs. Perhaps this household quality was not so much the result of design as of solidity. It is difficult to maintain individuality while all the undignified

little noises of domestic existence are heard by the neighbours.

When Irene Dale let herself into 43 Stacpoole Terrace by the solid front door, which notwithstanding the neglect of a century still closed itself with quiet dignity, and smelt the warm frowsty interior she was as sharply aware it was her own home as one may suppose the lioness is aware, by its odour, of her own den. Her mother and elder sister Winnie were still up, sitting on either side of the kitchen fire, neither, for a wonder, with the glass of whisky which was usually beside her at such an hour. The explanation of this was immediately forthcoming when Irene entered.

"What would you do with dad? Every drop in the house did he drink this evening while ma was over at Mrs. Cavanagh's."

Thus Winnie, who had receded from the first line of girls at the Orient, of which ten years ago she had been the beauty, to the extras, even from which obscure group her rapidly increasing bulk must very soon debar her. She was sitting, or rather sprawling, in a tumbledown wicker chair, her skirts pulled up to her knees, her stays unfastened. Nobody beholding her in such blowsy disarray would have believed that as lately as five years ago she had still been one of the prettiest girls in the Orient corps de ballet. She was like a sodden overblown rose, and the youthfulness of her face—she was not yet thirty—accentuated the deplorable collapse of her figure. She had lived a gay and dashing life for some years, but now she was wondering whether an elderly Kentish Town stationer in a small way of business could be lured into matrimony if she accepted his offer to come and keep house for him.

"Why didn't you lock the bottle up?" said Irene. "You know what dad is."

"Lock the bottle up?" repeated Mrs. Dale, her

beady eyes, which seemed bright and cold as a snake's in her wide tallowy face, glittering malevolently. "Yes, I do know what dad is. And because I do know what dad is I'm not going to lock up a bottle of whisky and have him burn the house down to get at it."

Many years ago Mr. Benjamin Dale had been a Thames pilot, which according to his family had given him a horror of water for the rest of his life. Also, according to his family, he had retired from his profession on a pension. This pension was a mysterious business. Its amount varied curiously, and it always had to be fetched in an extremely secretive way by Mr. Dale in person. Sometimes it fell into arrears, when Mr. Dale would wander about the house, muttering threats of what he intended to do to some people if his pension were not paid. Except for the occasional activity of body and mind involved in collecting this pension Mr. Dale spent almost the whole of his time on a flock-exuding chair-bed, reading old Sunday newspapers, and surrounded by a number of dusty cardboard hat-boxes which he used instead of the furniture he had pawned to supply himself with drink when the pension was not punctual. Gradually he had reached a decision that old hat-boxes were much less trouble than wardrobes and chests of drawers, and however flush he might be he never made any effort to redeem his old furniture or buy new. He drank so much that he ate very little. If it was more expensive to keep him in drink, it was much less trouble than cooking, and there was not one of the Dales who if given the choice between expense and trouble would not have preferred expense.

It would have been hard to imagine a more unattractive couple than the parents of Winnie and Irene Dale, yet neither of the girls had ever seriously considered leaving home. Both of them were really happiest when

they could loll half-dressed in front of a big fire, drinking enough to sustain the illusion of careless well-being until it was time to make the effort to go to the theatre. In the days of Irene's friendship with Jenny Pearl her companion's *joie de vivre* had kept her alert; but there had always been differences of opinion between the two of them about the ideal way of spending one's leisure, and when Jenny had fallen in love with Maurice Avery, after the first month or two of sullen jealousy Irene had easily found a *nepenthe* in the frowsty languor of the kitchen at home. Arthur Danby continued to turn up at intervals from Paris, and although he no longer wished Irene to wear short skirts and high button-boots he was still generous with his jewellery, which when he was gone Mrs. Dale took off to the pawnshop, investing the money thus raised in drink. Irene had accompanied Arthur Danby to Paris on several occasions, and at one time she had had a vague hope that Jenny would attach herself permanently to his brother Jack. Had that happened, she might have brought herself to quit Stacpoole Terrace for good and live in Paris. However, playing the procuress for Jack Danby had been the cause of the final break with Jenny. Then Jack Danby had died, and Arthur Danby had suddenly lost all his money (or more correctly had spent the last of what he had), and since he sent her home last time from Paris she had neither seen nor heard of him. The jewellery he had given her had all been sold, and the combined salaries of Winnie and herself would not have kept the household in Stacpoole Terrace going without the help of dad's pension, which to save his chair-bed repose from being disturbed by his wife he contributed to the common fund. Even with that, drink had been much scarcer, and the problem of the future was beginning to look complicated. Winnie might lose her job at the Orient at any time, and if the rumour of disbanding the ballet turned out correct Irene

herself was unlikely to retain hers. Fifty shillings a week between them was not much, but it was something. Poor Ethel would never be able to earn any money. Yes, the future began to look complicated.

"Well," said Mrs. Dale, "I hear Jenny's been shot. Well, I can't say I'm surprised. She often used to aggravate *me*. She was always too sure of herself to my way of thinking. You can't be sure of anything in this world. And the proof of that is that your dad's pension's stopped. He's been expecting it for the last three weeks, and to-day I nagged at him till he heaved himself off that bed of his and dressed himself and took the tube up to Highgate to enquire at the usual place. Well, it's finished. The one who was paying his pension died two weeks back. Dad came home all of a shake, because it seems the lawyers hinted something about prosecuting. Well, it must have upset dad, for I happened to be looking out of the window when he came round the corner, and I never saw him moving so fast since I first met him. He asked me if I had a bottle in the house, and I hadn't the heart to say 'No,' and it certainly did him good. Still, once he knew I'd got a bottle in the house I might just as well have drunk the rest right off, because he was bound to have it sooner or later. Still I didn't grudge it him, for he was really upset, and I had one myself over at Mrs. Cavanagh's."

"Dad's pension stopped?" Irene repeated. She looked at Winnie sitting by the fire in her blowsiness, and as she was thinking that the next news would be that Winnie had been given her notice by the Orient management, Winnie said defiantly:

"All right, you needn't look so funny at me, young Irene. Perhaps you'll get *your* notice before you've been at the Orient as long as me."

"Did you get your notice to-night?"

"Oh yes, you didn't know, did you?" Winnie

sneered. "Don't be so damned innocent, Irene. It makes me tired."

"What are you going to do?" Irene asked. "We can't all live on my thirty bob a week."

"We'll have to sell the house, that's all there is to it," Mrs. Dale announced.

Irene was horrified. This house which had been the first fruits of dad's pension after he retired from his job as a Thames pilot was the most permanent, indeed the only permanent thing in her existence of perpetual improvisation. She could not imagine 43 Stacpoole Terrace inhabited by any people except themselves.

"That's the last thing we'll sell," Irene insisted.

"That may be," retorted her mother. "But we've reached the last, my girl. Look round you. Except for a few bits and pieces of furniture I wouldn't use for my own coffin, what else is there to pawn or sell? No, I've told your Dad he's got to see about it first thing to-morrow. We ought to get not a penny less than five hundred pounds for this house, and that'll keep us till we have time to look round and see just where we are."

"You don't have to look round far to see we're well in the soup," Irene commented bitterly. Jenny's prophecy was echoing with an ominous menace in her mind. *An old woman in a basement in a red petticoat with a halfpenny dip and a quartern of gin.* "What's dad doing now?" she asked.

"Trying to get a bit of sleep, and which he needs if he's going to be fit to stand up to these house agents to-morrow morning. Anyone who's going to be upsides with house agents doesn't want to wake up the day after. And you needn't sit there and gape at me, Irene. I haven't felt so much put about since that Bank Holiday eight years come next August when we missed the *Clacton Belle* all because your dad took it into his head he must cut his

corns before we started. What a perspiration I was in, and if we'd have taken the turning I wanted instead of going all round by . . . ”

“Haven't we got enough to annoy us to-night,” Irene cut in, “without having to hear any more about the *Clacton Belle*? You took your encore for that story in the year dot.”

Mrs. Dale sniffed heavily.

“Nice thing when anybody can't open their mouth in their own house without having their head bit off,” she complained.

“Well, you won't have a house of your own in a minute,” Irene retorted. “Good night, all.”

She was soon followed by Winnie up to the room they shared. Every crack in the ceiling, every hole in the threadbare carpet, every stain on the greenish-yellow wallpaper was immemorial in the lives of both of them. The photograph of Winnie, Irene, and their mother on donkeys at Margate on some shining summer's day of the 'nineties could not be imagined hanging anywhere else except over the mantelpiece of this room. And where else but in this room could be hung that cracked mirror between which and its chipped and tarnished gilt frame were stuck the photographs of girls in ten years of Orient ballet? Nor would any other room ever reproduce the familiar smell of this room—that mixture of gas and scent and age-long dust and femininity.

“Is it really right about dad losing his pension?” Irene asked.

“It's right enough,” Winnie replied, emerging in a torn shift from the collapse of her clothes like one of Hogarth's barnstorming beauties.

“And you've got your notice?”

“I reckon Maudie Carlton and me are only the first of a lot of notices,” said Winnie, letting her hair fall down over her fat shoulders.

"Where's ma think we're going if we do sell this house?"

"She reckoned we'd take a flat somewhere off Drury Lane. She reckoned we could keep a flat going with the money dad got for the house until something turned up."

"I reckon we want to find a flat to keep us going," said Irene. "What about this fellow who wants you to keep house for him?"

"He won't want to keep house for dad and ma and you and Ethel as well. Besides, his wife came back this morning. I suppose some Nosey Parker wrote and told her her old man was going gay with a ballet girl."

"Oh, well, it'll be all the same a hundred years on," Irene yawned.

With this she got into bed and tried to shut out with sleep the misfortunes of this unlucky day. Sleep would not come to her. Hour after hour she lay wide awake, listening to Winnie's breathing on the pillow beside her, hour after hour racing back into the happy past to recapture happy occasions or plunging ahead into a future seeming void of all happy occasions. "God, I think Jenny has the best of it," she sighed, raising herself to turn for the twentieth time her hot pillow as the sparrows began to cheep at the morning. But with the growing strength of daylight the fancy of death grew more and more repugnant to Irene. The sun above the roofs sent a warm benign glow through the flimsy blind, and the sparrows were now mute. She felt at last a welcome drowsiness stealing over her senses. Perhaps things would not be so bad. Perhaps a fellow with money would come along. She would know how to handle such a one this time. Yes, a fellow like Madge Wilson's Bertold . . . nothing to look at . . . but rich . . . yes, she'd watch out her mother didn't pawn the next

diamond rings she was given . . . nothing to look at . . . but rich . . . if Madge Wilson could manage it why should not she . . . but she must not let her figure go—Mrs. Bob had been right about good corsets—she mustn't get fat like Winnie . . . and Madge Wilson could easily get too fat if it came to that. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

MADGE WILSON

THE other girls often accused Madge Wilson of making a deliberate mystery of the dark foreigner who had taken up with her four years ago and who since then had kept her definitely better dressed than the rest of the first line of boys. Actually Madge Wilson was much too mentally lazy to be bothered with the elaboration of mysteries. She was the *femme moyenne sensuelle* whose chief demand from life was the maximum of comfort with the minimum expense of energy. Bertold Krebs had noted her one evening from the stalls and sent his card round to invite her to supper. They had laughed over the name in the dressing-room, and Madge would probably have paid no more attention to her admirer had not the stage-door keeper advised her that he must be rich and generous if any dependence could be placed on the size of the tip he had been given for conveying the invitation.

"Well, perhaps I better had go out with him, George," Madge had suggested, a little doubtfully.

"Yes, don't you miss your chance," the worldly-wise George had replied. "He talks like a foreigner. I reckon he don't know his way about London yet."

For once George's long experience of stage-door clients had misled him. Bertold Krebs knew his way about London extremely well. He was looking for an inexpensive and not too emotionally exacting mistress, and in Madge Wilson he found just what he required. By the end of supper on that first evening at the Monico

he had discovered that Madge was nineteen, that she lived with her widowed mother above the small second-hand furniture shop she kept in the New Kent Road, that she had neither brothers nor sisters, and that she was not particularly interested in any other man. Madge herself discovered nothing about her admirer except that he had a flat in Shaftesbury Avenue. People far more inquisitive than Madge Wilson had tried hard, but had been unsuccessful in discovering any more than she.

Some people said Bertold Krebs was a Hungarian, others that he was a German, others that he was a Pole. Most people agreed that he was a Jew. His true background was money. There are so many Bertolds all over the world of whom we know nothing except that they have money. Sometimes their method of obtaining and accumulating this money involves them in an odious publicity; but such a misfortune befalls a very small minority, for since man allows to man the utmost latitude in the acquisition of money few rich men find any bar to their progress until they stand at the gates of Heaven. Creatures like Bertold Krebs go about their business with as little attention from the average man as an industrious ant or beetle.

The first step Bertold took to secure Madge Wilson was to secure her mother. This he did by buying the contents of her shop at her own price. When he was the owner of the most dilapidated collection of heterogeneous junk in London he told her still to consider it her own property and to sell any of it that tempted a purchaser's fancy.

"But I want nothing else second-hand," he added, in those biting tones of his. "You comprehend me, I think? If I find that Madge is second-hand for me, I take everything away that moment. Let her enjoy herself, but she must sleep at home, and if she is after one o'clock to come home it must always be with me

that she comes. You comprehend me, I think? For the rest I shall be careful she has plenty nice clothes and perhaps sometimes she will go for a little holiday with me, but not often because I am so busy."

Mrs. Wilson was so much struck by the resemblance of her daughter's admirer to a successful rival of hers in the second-hand business, whose shop was hardly two blocks away from her own, that she had the same feeling of hopeless competition in resisting the offer of Bertold Krebs as she had had when Abraham Kohn was bidding against her at a sale. She had a keen sense of her pretty daughter's value, and coming from most men such an offer as she had just heard would at once have suggested the possibility of achieving a triumphant marriage. As it was, she never considered the chances of marriage, and had no hesitation in pledging her word that Madge's conduct should never give Mr. Krebs cause to regret his bargain. It did not strike her that Madge was the freshest thing she had sold since she had opened her shop.

So for over four years Mrs. Wilson had done all she could to see that her daughter's Bertold was content with his purchase. Moreover, Madge herself was taking no risks. She liked too well the certainty of good clothes that her association with Bertold provided; and if sometimes she wished he would give her the money to buy them for herself instead of always overlooking the transaction in person, the lack of money beyond her weekly salary at the Orient offered her as much fun as the other girls enjoyed from those purchases by instalment from Miss Chibbett.

Once Jenny Pearl had taunted Madge with the indignity of letting Bertold make a poppy-show of her by always being present when the dressmaker was fitting her, but Madge had merely giggled.

"Oh, well, he likes it, and it doesn't hurt me.

Besides, he's very useful. He always knows just what's wrong."

Bertold gave Madge a certain amount of jewellery too; but he kept a strict watch over it, and she had to produce it on demand. Once when washing her hands she lost a stone from a sapphire ring he had given her, and when he noticed at supper that it was missing he rated her so harshly that she sobbed for the rest of the evening out of sheer fright.

The intimate side of the association did not worry Madge greatly. She was as yet insensitive in sexual matters. If she was mildly bored by his amorous moods she was not much more bored than by rehearsals for a new ballet. And in any case Bertold himself was too well preoccupied with the business of money-making to waste much of his time on passion. Madge looked like a pretty doll, and as such he always treated her. She did not tire him by asking stupid questions: she enjoyed good food. What better companion could he have for supper? Almost every night he waited for her, on wet evenings inside the stage-door, on fine evenings in the court where he would walk up and down, smoking a thin Murillo cigar and immersed in problems of profit and loss. He was always polite to the other girls, and curiously anxious for this politeness to be returned. Irene Dale could have done nothing to wound him more deeply than to ignore his salute that fine June evening.

He mentioned her behaviour at once to Madge when she came out a minute or two later.

"Oh her! Don't worry yourself about her. She's always sulky," said Madge. "Besides, her sister Winnie got her notice to-night."

Bertold's yellowish eyes narrowed.

"So, it begins," he murmured to himself. "Where will we have our supper to-night, Madge?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I think we shall go to Romano's," he decided.

They sat upstairs on the balcony and devoted their attention to devilled kidneys.

"Did you read that in the paper about Jenny Pearl being shot by the fellow she married? She was no friend of mine at the end, but it gave me a nasty turn," Madge said, with a gentle little belch, for which she begged pardon.

"So that was Jenny Pearl," commented Bertold, nodding to himself as if he had long foreseen tragedy. "She was no friend of yours, Madge. And she was always very rude to me. She was the rudest of all the girls. Well, you need not be afraid, Madge. If I find you with a young man I will just take away my clothes and my rings and put your mother and you in the street. That is all I will do."

"And I believe you would," Madge exclaimed, in something like a tone of admiration.

"You can believe it very well, my dear girl; but I do not think you will be quite so silly as that. And now listen. To-day I have settled with the management of the Orient that the theatre will close in a fortnight. The ballet will be finished. These old men like Moberley cannot comprehend that such a ballet as theirs is *vieux jeu* even in a stupid country like England."

"Less of it now. Don't start running down England. You know I hate for you to do that."

"Ah-ha, my pretty little Britannia, wave your fork, but do not stick it into me."

"Well, I mean it, Bertold. You've done very well out of poor old England, and you're not going to call it a stupid country. You can call me stupid as much as you like, but not England."

The dark little foreigner crackled a Colorado cigar against his ear before lighting it. He looked as if he would have crackled himself if pinched.

"Tranquillize yourself, Madge. I am talking business to you now. The ballet, I say, will be finished."

"You told me that before," said Madge, who was still feeling ruffled by the reflection upon the intelligence of her native land.

"Yes, but my plans are now more clear. In August you and I shall go for a little holiday to Ostend. But not for long, because I must be here to see about my business. Then you will go to a singing-maestro and you will work hard because I have for you a little part in the revue which we will produce in September at the Orient. I hold now a majority of the shares. You comprehend what that means?"

Madge shook her fair fluffy head and opened wide her china blue eyes.

"It means that from now what I say the management must do."

Bertold took the cigar from his mouth and closed his colourless lips in a tight thin line.

"You mean you'll take Mr. Moberley's place?"

"Bah! Do you think I have nothing better to do than to pat girls' heads? No, I will put another managing director. Now, tell me, who of the girls in your dressing-room would you like me to engage again in September? Irene Dale goes anyway, whatever you say. I do not let a fat red-haired girl like that stare me in the face when I pay her the compliment to lift my hat. So! She is finished. But I have thought to keep the others for a trial. You do not want any of them to go?"

"No, because I wouldn't like for them to think I'd got them out. Well, you'd be the same, Bertold, wouldn't you, if you was me?"

He smiled sardonically.

"Oh, yes. I am always very kind."

Suddenly his expression changed.

"Where is your turquoise bracelet of mine?" he demanded angrily.

Madge looked at her wrist and turned pale.

"Oh, my god, I must have left it in the dressing-room. I must have left it in my make-up box."

"To-morrow morning you will go to the theatre at nine o'clock to fetch it, and when you have found it you will telephone to me at my office."

"Wouldn't it do if I was there by lunch time?" Madge asked woefully. The prospect of reaching the Orient from the New Kent Road by nine o'clock in the morning appalled her. Why, it was an hour earlier than the earliest rehearsal call.

"No, it will not do at all, Madge. I do not give you turquoise bracelets for you to leave them in your make-up box. Now, I wish no arguments, please."

"But I shall be so shocking tired, Bertold. Why, it'll mean me getting up at half-past seven. Oh, Bertold, I'll . . ."

"Enough," he said sharply. "I will expect a telephone call from you at ten minutes after nine in my office."

"Well, will you drive me home in a taxi?" she pleaded.

"No, I will drive you to the trams. No more than that."

"Well, I'd like a strawberry ice," said Madge. Bertold called to the waiter.

"But eat it quickly," he told her, "because it is now a quarter-past twelve, and you must get to bed as soon as you can."

"You *are* a beast, making me get up at such an unnatural hour."

"Eat your ice, and do not grumble because I punish you a little for your carelessness."

Bertold would not relent. He took Madge no

farther in a taxi than to the nearest stopping-place for South London trams. It was after one o'clock before she reached her home in the New Kent Road, entering by the shop through a wicket in the shutters. In the dim light of the turned-down gas the contents of the shop possessed something of the glamour of the Forty Thieves' Cave, but as soon as the gas was turned up the glamour faded and the contents were revealed for the accumulated rubbish they were. Washstands and chests of drawers, the varnish of which had given way here and there to fibrous sores, cracked basins and chamber-pots without handles, bedsteads with dull dented brass knobs and laths furred by dusty fluff, vases each one more hideously contorted than its neighbour and mostly chipped, all the squalor and ugliness of houses disembowelled by poverty. And here and there among this offal of domestic interiors a few pitiable curiosities, treasured for years by their owners in the conviction that one day in an emergency of want they would come to the rescue of those who had esteemed them so highly. Here were oriental gongs, incomplete sets of chessmen, spotted prints, mouldering stuffs, the head of a kangaroo mounted on what was reputed to be a rare Australian wood, a stuffed falcon in a glass case which moulted every time the shop door was slammed, a collection of dislusted Brazilian butterflies, and a clock supposed to tell the year, the month, the day, and the hour, but which had presumably ceased to function at half-past three on the third of August in the year of the Indian Mutiny.

In the room at the back of the shop Madge found waiting for her a simple supper of bread and cheese, with pickled onions and a small bottle of Bass, to which in spite of the devilled kidneys at Romano's and the prospect of having to drag herself out of bed at half-past seven the next morning she sat down with gusto. A corner of the already crowded room was taken up by a large dappled-

grey rocking-horse with a fine flowing mane, but in the place of what had once no doubt been an equally fine flowing tail a moth-eaten fox's brush. This animal must have been bought since she left her mother early in the afternoon to go to tea with one of the girls at the other end of London. Presently Mrs. Wilson, a large, faded, flaccid blonde, came in. She was wrapped in a patch-work dressing-gown in which pieces of an old magenta quilt were the most numerous. From what at first had been a carefully cultivated assumption of indifference to what was being sold at an auction or bought by a customer in her own shop Mrs. Wilson's impassivity had become habitual.

"Ah, there you are, Madge," she said without a hint of recognition either in the tone of her voice or the glance of her milky blue eyes. "I bought that rocking-horse and a set of copper pans at that sale in the Walworth Road."

"It's lost its tail, mother."

"Well, what's that stuck in the hole at the back if it isn't its tail? You're not going to tell me it's a moustache?"

"It doesn't match with the mane."

"You're too particular, you are. Well, any news?" Madge told her mother about the intention to close the Orient at the end of the month, and of Bertold's ambition for her to study singing and play a part in the autumn revue.

"Well, that'll make a bit of a change for you."

"It'll make a big change for everybody. Some of the girls aren't likely to come back to the Orient ever again."

Mrs. Wilson shook her head vaguely.

"Well, I shouldn't start in thinking about that to-night. It's time you was in bed."

Madge broke the news about her turquoise bracelet.

"If you aren't thoughtless, Madge! You'll leave

yourself in your make-up box next. And in fact sometimes you look as if you had. Well, I hope you'll find it. But it's a nasty business for you having to telephone. I'd as soon pick up a beehive as a telephone."

Madge now gave her mother the news about Jenny Pearl.

"Shot was she? Well, that's a quick way out of all one's troubles. A very quick way in fact. Still, it can't be any too pleasant. You'd better watch out with Bertold. You don't want him to start in shooting just when everything looks so promising. And now, you go on up and I'll put the gas out downstairs. I can find my way about the shop in the dark."

That was true. Long practice in reaching from what seemed inaccessible corners the various articles customers desired to examine more closely had enabled Mrs. Wilson to move about her shop as easily as a fish swims by night or by day in the sea.

Madge put the turquoise bracelet out of her mind when she got into bed and lay awake for a while to contemplate an otherwise most agreeable future. The most agreeable prospect of all was her position with regard to the other girls. She would actually have a certain amount of influence in the decision of who should stay and who should go, but the girls would all think that the decision lay entirely with her. She would merely have to indicate with a look that she thought this or that, and not one of them would dare to disagree with her in the future. She might of course add to her power behind the scenes a success with the audience in front. It was a nuisance having to take singing-lessons, especially in August when all one wanted to do was to loll back and read a magazine. Still, if a little trouble for a month should lead to seeing her name written with electric lamps outside the Orient it would be worth it. What a lucky day it had been for her when she took Bertold's

fancy! It had been the number in that ballet when half the first line of boys had been dressed as little girls in socks and very short frilly skirts. She had worn pale blue socks and a pale blue sash with big pale blue bows in her hair and had shown a longer stretch of bare leg than had ever been seen on the London stage before. She and Jenny Pearl and Irene Dale and Elsie Crawford had been the girls, and Gladys West, Queenie Danvers, Maudie Chapman and Rita Vitali had been their sweethearts dressed in velveteens with Vandyck collars. She and Irene with pale blue ribbons. Jenny and Elsie with pink ones. Maudie Chapman had been her boy, and of course Maudie Chapman's big nose and massive calves and mop of black frizzy hair had been just what was wanted to set off her partner to the best advantage.

How the audience used to applaud that scene! There was never a night they did not get two encores. And the rest of the girls were as jealous! One of them standing in the wings had said with a sniff and a shrug when the audience were applauding wildly, "What's all the excitement about? I ask you. There's nothing in them." And Jenny Pearl had said with one of those mocking grimaces of hers, "Nothing in them? There's four pretty little girls in them, ducky." And one night she and Jenny and Irene had broken all the rules and gone to Covent Garden Ball in their dresses, but Elsie Crawford had been afraid of what her Artie would say. What a night! The man who took the tickets hadn't wanted to let them in at first because he thought they really were kids. Nobody had paid any attention to anybody else at that ball. They had been chased by every man in the place, in and out of the boxes, up and down the stairs, round and round the very floor itself. And what a rush to see them home! They had been six inside the four-wheeler, and one fellow had sat up beside the old cabby and two had sat behind, but they fell off

somewhere because they were too blotto to hold on. Over Waterloo Bridge and down Waterloo Road, singing all the way, and when they got to the New Kent Road Jenny and Irene had to swear they were coming in with her, and the fellows who had driven them back were absolutely furious because they thought they were going to have everything they wanted on the journey back in the cab. "Oh, but we're good little girls. We don't do things like that." Madge could hear Jenny's voice now as she escaped from arms that would have detained her and slipped through the wicket in the shutters of the shop. And next morning her mother had come up with tea and they had shouted to her to go away and let them sleep till it was time to go down to the theatre and dress. They had slept the three of them in one bed. And now Jenny was dead after quarrelling with her, and Irene was as good as dead. Well, it had been Jenny's fault. She shouldn't have tried to pretend that she and her Maurice were better than other people. She shouldn't always have been so rude about Bertold. She shouldn't have been so ready to criticize other people.

"It wasn't as if I'd ever pretended to be potty on Bertold," said Madge to herself. "But he has been very useful. And any old way all this love that girls wave flags about only makes them miserable."

Look at Belle Harris. There wasn't a prettier girl at the Orient than Belle had been. Everybody said so. And a clever little dancer, too. And then she'd gone mad on that fellow they called Silky. Yes, he was good-looking. But what a rotter! Got her in the family way, and then took her off to some doctor and left her to pay for the operation, though she nearly died of it. And then got her in the family way again, and when she wouldn't go and have another operation just pushed off and left her with the kid. But was Belle glad to be well rid of such a rotter? Not her. Lost all her looks worrying after

him, and now you wouldn't even call her rather pretty. And that was love. Anyway, she'd see that Bertold put in a word to keep Belle on when the changes were made. Poor kid, it was a shame the way life had gone for her. Madge turned over, luxuriating in the well-being radiated by the consciousness that she would be able to help girls like Belle Harris in the future. But some of them had better look out. Maudie Chapman, for instance. Just because Maudie was married she didn't know everything. She was getting on now. Maudie must be all of twenty-eight and she ought to watch out. Let her go on calling people two-faced things and see what happened to her presently.

"If I have a part in this revue next autumn Bertold jolly well ought to give me a new fur coat. I wonder if there's a chance of getting mink out of him."

It was on thoughts of fur that Madge fell asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

MAUDIE CHAPMAN

MAUDIE CHAPMAN always dressed as quickly as she could after the show. Walter was very good about staying in with Ivy, she used to assure herself, but she could never get rid of a nervous anxiety that one evening he would feel impelled to go round the corner and have one and that while he was gone something dreadful would happen to Ivy. Every night Maudie's apprehensiveness over Ivy's safety began to work itself up during the final scene of the ballet and continued to grow more acute until by the time she had alighted from the bus she had almost to run in a fever through the melancholy grey streets and gloomy squares of Pimlico until she came to the house at the corner of Alverton Street.

On this June evening the shock of the news of Jenny Pearl's death was added to her nightly worry over Ivy's welfare. The result was that in the final scene she twice went wrong and was reprimanded sharply by the stage-manager. Luckily the fierce Italian maître de ballet had already taken himself and the long pole with which he marked the steps to his own room. Maudie Chapman had been at the Orient for over ten years, and she was held to be one of the most dependable dancers in the theatre. Indeed once or twice she had gone on in an emergency for one of the prima ballerinas.

"I was upset by the news about Jenny Pearl," she explained. "I just seemed to lose myself altogether."

"Well, I won't fine you again. But I'll have to fine

you for being off for your first entrance in *On The River*. We're all very sorry to hear about Jenny Pearl, but if we all let our private feelings get the better of us it would hardly be fair to the audience, would it? Don't forget they've paid for their seats, and we've got to see that they get their money's worth. All right. I'll say no more about that muddle in the finale."

Maudie hurried away to dress. Mishaps and bad news and ill-omens had been heaped one upon the other for her this evening and during the whole of the jogging bus-ride home she tormented herself with wild fancies of what might have happened to Ivy. Walter might have gone out this evening, thinking Ivy was fast asleep. Ivy might have woken up in a fright to find herself alone. The window might have been left open. Ivy might have leaned out of it and fallen into the street. Or she might have been burned to death. Or the ceiling might have fallen down upon her. Or a stray cat might have got in and even now be pressing down upon that little form and poisoning it with evil breath. Or she might have started up out of a bad dream and frightened herself into a fit. Or Walter might have turned down the gas too low and a draught might have blown it out and Ivy might have been suffocated by the escape, or worse still Walter might have come back and struck a match and blown up Ivy and himself. Or a madman, prowling the streets with a hatchet, might have slipped in if Walter had left the front-door on the jar when he went round the corner to have one.

Alverton Street is one of those fast-decaying streets in a district which perhaps more than any other in London conveys to the observer a radically wicked personality. It wears an air of ill-fame even in those respectable parts of it which drag at the skirts of Belgravia. The purlieus of every great railway terminus in London from Paddington to King's Cross are squalid and evil, and the nearness

of Victoria Station accounts for much of Pimlico's sinister effect. Not for all of it, however. The very architecture of the houses seems to have been inspired by that diabolic spirit of gain which ruled the nineteenth century. On a foggy night, one of those foggy nights such as on which Neil Cream the poisoner loved to stalk his wretched victims with those deadly pills of strychnine, Pimlico is the street scene of a nightmare.

The house on the first floor of which Maudie Chapman, or rather Maudie Rowell, lived with her husband, was at the Embankment corner of Alverton Street and from the fact that Alverton Street, instead of lying at right angles to Grosvenor Road, turned off from it at an acute angle this corner house looked as if it had been pushed forward from the rest of the short street like a stage wing. This effect was emphasized by the way one of the Embankment arc lamps threw a brilliant light upon Number Twenty-six, while the houses beyond it stood in comparative shadow owing to the interposition of a high blank wall at the opposite corner. The gaunt, flat-faced grey house flood-lighted in this fashion gave such a haunted impression in the silence of midnight that Maudie dreaded to approach it from the end of the Vauxhall Bridge Road, but preferred to reach it by walking from the Monster public-house in the other direction.

Maudie had now been married to Walter Rowell for nearly four years, and she had begun to feel pessimistic about that little house in Ealing or Willesden on which she had set her heart. Walter Rowell was a taxi-driver, and between what he earned on the road and she in the theatre it ought to have been easy enough to start buying their own house instead of living as they did on one floor of somebody else's house. Unfortunately, whenever Walter announced that the time had really come for them

to see about getting a house of their own, fortune decided to give him such a setback over the horses, that debts of honour had to take precedence of little houses in Ealing or Willesden.

"Look here, Maudie. I'm about fed up with Alverton Street, S.W., and that's a fact. Next Sunday I'll get the guv'nor to let me have the old bus, and you and me and Ivy 'll have a look round for a nice little place of our own. I heard of a wunnerful good thing for Haydock (or Sandown or Lingfield or Gatwick or Alexandra or any other Park) next Saturday. Can't be beaten. Big Starting Price Job. And a friend of mine is putting a fiver on for me with his bookmaker. You can be sure it's a fear-nothing special Cert, or I wouldn't be risking five blooming soverings. And you may lay he wouldn't be risking them neither. This isn't one of your half-dollar street-corner fancies. This is the Goods. Say we don't get no more than eights. Well, that gives us our furniture right away."

But of course the certainty never did win, and for the next five or six months Walter would be paying back his obliging friend; but the Sunday drive in search of the right little house would be again postponed.

Maudie never grumbled. She used to decide that Walter was too good-natured. If a friend gave him a tip like that he wouldn't like to seem to think nothing of it, and if another friend offered to put a big sum on for him with his own bookie Walter could hardly refuse. It was just bad luck. Perhaps one day the certainty would come off. And yet even if it did Walter might easily go and spend the money on what he called valuable curios. Really Walter ought to have married Madge Wilson. He'd have enjoyed himself going round sales of old rubbish with Madge's mother.

"You ought to have married Madge Wilson, Walter."

"Why, what's the matter? Are you getting tired of your old man?"

"No, of course I'm not, Walter. Only Ivy did badly need a new mailcart, and we could have done with a nice three-piece suite, and I haven't been able to put by anything yet for a new winter coat."

"You mean you wish I hadn't have bought this stuffed porcupine?"

"Well, of course it's lovely, Walter, but I'm so afraid Ivy 'll hurt herself playing with it. I moved it a bit quick when I was dusting this morning and I gave myself quite a nasty jab."

"Well, of course I'm going to get a glass case for it."

"Yes, but that means more money, Walter."

And then Walter would shake his head, with an air of profound wisdom.

"You know, if one was ever in a real fix these curios of mine would bring in a lot of money, Maudie. That's what you can't understand. It's really a kind of saving buying them."

And she usually agreed weakly that she supposed it was. Walter was so fond of his curios. It was bad luck on a fellow if his wife couldn't take an interest in his hobbies. That was the way fellows took to going out and finding more lively company elsewhere. And Walter was very good really. Lots of fellows wouldn't be so ready to stay in after a long day's driving round the houses so as to look after a kid like Ivy. And he was very smart was Walter. The other girls often passed the remark to her how smart her Walter was. He kept his taxi very smart, too. Always liked to stick a bunch of flowers in it, Walter did. He reckoned he got many an extra tanner by those flowers. And when all was said he *was* Ivy's father, and Ivy was a little love. The other girls had all told her that except for Rita's twins there

wasn't a lovelier kid anywhere. Of course, it was too soon to tell whether Ivy was going to have a big nose. Her own big nose had not properly started till she was close on eighteen. But Walter had a very neat nose, and Ivy was more like him than herself. Ivy had her mother's colour, though. When she'd been a kid herself people had often told her mother that she had cheeks like red roses. And they'd looked all the richer because of her dark frizzy hair. Some of that vanished colour came back to Maudie's cheeks on this June night as she hurried homeward by the long lamplit streets of Pimlico, a presentiment of disaster heavy upon her mind.

There was Number Twenty-six with its peeling stucco front in the light of the arc lamp. It looked just the same as it always did. There was no policeman outside. There were no neighbours leaning out of open windows along the street. There were no firemen or fire-engines. There was no life of any kind except a starved cat slinking along the railings, no semblance of life except where a half-sheet of some newspaper twitched in a light June breeze blowing from the river. Maudie let herself in and walked up the uncarpeted stairs to the first floor. Not all her preoccupation with ill-fortune past and future prevented her wondering as she always did on going up those stairs when the owner of the house was going to lay a carpet on them. The mean hound, he'd been waiting for years now for Walter to put one down, but as Walter said, why should he buy carpets for the use of the second and third floors? He'd laid a strip along the passage outside their two rooms and a kitchenette, and *that* was the owner's job, he reckoned.

In the sitting-room, which was separated from the bedroom by folding-doors, Walter was sitting with his feet on the mantelpiece, reading a tattered novel by Nat Gould.

"Is Ivy all right, Walter?"

"Yes, Ivy's all right. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. I got into my head something had happened to her. I'll tell you about it in a minute."

Maudie passed through into the bedroom, and peeped into Ivy's cot. She seemed a bit extra flushed to-night, but her colour was always higher when she was asleep. She lifted cautiously the little hand and arm outside the clothes and put them under cover. Ivy's hand did seem rather hot. Still, she ought to keep herself well covered up. If kids got the chance they'd sleep with nothing on at all. Terrors they were for stripping the bedclothes off of themselves.

"Ivy seems quite all right," she said, coming back into the sitting-room.

"I told you she was quite all right," her husband answered. "I've been reading here for a couple of hours and she hasn't stirred. I don't know what you're fussing about."

"Walter, you remember Jenny Pearl?"

"Not half."

"Well, she's been murdered."

"Go on!"

"It's true. It was in the papers to-night. Death of a London dancer."

"Was that her? I read about it. 'Smatter of fact I read about it in two papers."

"Yes, that was her. My god, Walter, it gave me the biggest shock I ever had."

"It 'ud give anyone a nasty shock," he declared.

"It brought back all the old days," Maudie went on. "Before you and me was married. We used to have more fun at the Orient than than what we have now. I mean in the dressing-room. And of course we had a lot of fun outside, too."

"Yes, keeping me waiting till you couldn't find anything better," said her husband facetiously.

"Oh, don't make a joke about it, Walter, I wasn't even her best friend; but she was my best friend. Nobody made me laugh like what Jenny did, and I used to make her laugh, too. I don't know, I don't seem to make people laugh the way I could once."

"You worry too much, that's why," Walter assured her.

"Well, I wish we could move out of this house," she sighed. "It's getting on my nerves. It's the kind of place for a murder."

"Well, you needn't think *I'm* going to start in taking a gun to you. But we'll move as soon as we can. If that filly Queen Anne had won this afternoon I'd have had a good week."

"It would have been so nice for Ivy if she could have had a bit of a garden to toddle about in. She'll get all peaked here if we get a hot summer."

"Ivy's all right," said Walter confidently.

And the instant he had spoken there came from the bedroom a choked cry.

Maudie flung back the folding-doors and caught up her little girl from the cot.

"What's the matter, lovie? What is it? Did you have a nasty dream?"

Ivy buried her head in her mother's breast and began to whimper.

"She feels feverish to me, Walter."

"Go on, don't be so excitable. She's had a bit of a nightmare, that's all."

"I've a good mind to make you fetch the doctor."

"Don't be silly, Maudie. You can't go and drag a doctor out at this time of night just because a kid wakes up in a sudden fright."

"Yes, but you feel her hands how hot they are. I'm sure she's feverish."

Walter shook his head obstinately.

"Any kid wakes up hot at this time of year. Go on, put her back in her cot and get some supper and come to bed. I lit the gasfire for you in the kitchen."

"Would you like some nice hot milk, pet?" Maudie enquired tenderly of her little daughter.

Ivy shook her head and put a hand to her throat in evident discomfort.

"Of course the poor kid doesn't want hot milk. A glass of cold water's more what she wants," said Walter.

"I knew something awful was going to happen all the evening," Maudie bewailed. "I could hardly keep to my steps in the last ballet for worrying about it."

"That's right. Now work yourself up. I tell you Ivy hasn't made a sound the whole evening, and now because she wakes up out of a bad dream you've got to think she's dying. I don't know what's happened to you lately. You used to be as sensible as any girl I ever met. But your nerves has all gone to pieces. I reckon you ought to take a tonic. Why don't you try Cassell's Tablets? A pal of mine took two boxes and he reckoned they did him no end of good. He said he used to feel all of a . . ."

"Oh, for the love of Mike shut up, Walter. Who cares what your pal felt like? It's Ivy I'm worrying about. What's the matter, lovie? Is your throat hurting? There you are, Walter. She says it is. Oh, do go out and get a doctor. I'm sure she's really ill. Her colour isn't natural."

"There's no sense in fetching a doctor to her now," he argued. "If she isn't better in the morning I'll go round for him before I start down to the garage. Take her into bed with us if she's fretful. I'll get your supper for you, if you like."

"I knew she'd take ill if we stayed in this dog's island of a house. Look at the sickly kids all round. Look at all the rubbish in the areas. And I'm sure it's not healthy so close to the river. Oh, why couldn't you have done what I said and took a house of our own with a little garden?"

"I'm going to take a house of our own, aren't I, when I've got straight with what I owe? Blast it, Maudie, anybody to hear you would think I spent every halfpenny I earned on booze. How many times have you seen me canned since we was married? I ask you that."

"Who's talking about drink? Who's saying you're ever canned?"

"I know you're not, but you're nagging on about this bloody house with a bloody garden, and what I'm saying is you ought to think yourself bloody lucky I don't drink all my earnings away. Go on now, get undressed. I'll make you a cup of tea and bring it in to you if you don't want to eat any supper. And in the morning if the kid isn't better I'll fetch the doctor."

"Look here, Walter, can you hold her up to the light and let me see if I can look at her throat? If you hold her I can keep her tongue down with a teaspoon."

"Oh, for god's sake leave the poor kid alone and let her get to sleep. That'll do her more good than messing her about with a teaspoon."

It was after ten o'clock next morning before Doctor Welch arrived. Walter had gone off to his day's work.

The diagnosis was rapidly made.

"Scarlet fever. I'll ring up the West London Fever Hospital to have an ambulance sent for her as soon as possible."

"Send her away?" Maudie gasped in consternation.
"Send her away from me?"

"Certainly," the doctor replied brusquely. "You want to do the best for the child, don't you?"

"Of course, but couldn't I nurse her myself?"

"Is this your own house?"

"No, we just rent this floor."

"Then how can you take the proper precautions against infection? There are other lodgers to be considered. However, the main point is that the child will be more competently looked after in hospital. That must be your consolation. I'll have these rooms fumigated. Meanwhile, keep yourself to yourself."

"You mean, I oughtn't to go to the theatre to-night?"

"Not unless your clothes and these rooms have been fumigated. Surely you can take a night off? By Monday you can go about your business."

"And my husband? He has a taxi-cab."

"I think he'd better keep away from here over the week-end."

"And can you give Ivy anything to stop her being sick all the while?"

"No, that's a symptom which will pass in another hour or so."

The doctor promised to notify the owner of the house on his way out, and also Walter at the garage. Maudie was left with Ivy, whose temperature had by now carried her beyond the recognition of anybody or anything. About noon the ambulance drew up outside, to the immense entertainment of the children of the neighbourhood enjoying their Saturday holiday. A kindly man in a peaked cap came up with a great brown blanket in which he wrapped Ivy and carried her down to the ambulance.

In the solitude after Ivy's removal Maudie sat in a stupefaction of despair. The voices of the children playing below in the street struck at her heart like poignards. The doctor had told her that he could have done nothing more than he had been able to do later

even if he had been sent for during the night. So she and Walter had nothing with which to reproach themselves, except of course for not moving from Pimlico to better air and healthier surroundings. How could you expect to avoid a thing like scarlet fever if you went and lived in what was as good as a slum?

Early in the afternoon a note arrived from Walter, pushed under the door with a pair of tongs:

Cheer up old girl and do not work yourself up into a state. I'll be alright—I'll go over to Charlie Hopkinson over Sunday and hope I'll see you in the pink on Monday night. They say there's no call to worry too much over scarlet fever provided you get good treatment and Ivy will get good treatment at the horsepital you can bet your life.

Well heres how old girl from your ever loving

Walter

Walter wasn't worrying. Walter would go over to Charlie Hopkinson at Kilburn and have a jolly fine time. Walter thought scarlet fever the same as a cold. Walter did not try to fancy what it must be like to stay here all alone listening to the kids playing in the street and wondering how Ivy was.

At last they came to fumigate the rooms, and when the men had departed Maudie decided to go and enquire at the hospital for Ivy. She could easily have gone down to the theatre as it happened, but in a way it was as well that she had let them know she would not be there to-night. She would have been bound to go wrong in every dance, thinking of poor little Ivy. By Monday with good news from the hospital she would have more control of herself.

The Fever Hospital off Lillie Road seemed a huge forbidding red barrack of a place even in the golden glow of the summer evening. Maudie noticed plenty of

pretty girls in pretty light dresses coming away from the place. Could they be nurses? Anybody to look at them would see no difference between them and the girls coming away from the Orient. But they must be nurses. They must be off for the evening. Perhaps one of them had been looking after Ivy. Maudie felt encouraged by the sight of so many pretty girls. She had always thought of nurses as Plain Janes And No Nonsense. When she reached the office for enquiries she was told she was too late.

"But you don't mean to say I can't find out about my little girl before to-morrow?"

One of the hospital doctors passing by heard the misery in Maudie's tone, and asked her in which ward her little girl was.

"I don't know. She was taken away this morning. And I had to wait in for the fumigating. The name is Ivy Rowell."

The doctor, to the manifest disapproval of the official, busied himself with going into details, and went off after telling Maudie to wait. Presently he came back.

"Your little girl is going on as well as can be expected, Mrs. Rowell. There is no need for you to be extra anxious. I hope we shall have an encouraging report for you to-morrow. Good night."

"Good night, doctor, and thank you ever so much."

Maudie debated with herself taking a bus over to Kilburn to let Walter know how things were going. She feared, however, to detect in Walter's reception of her that she was unwelcome. He would be enjoying himself at Charlie Hopkinson's. He would be forgetting about his troubles. And if she saw by his manner that he did not want her she would never forgive him, and it was that kind of resentment which broke up people's lives. No, she would not chance Kilburn.

For a while Maudie wandered about in the neighbourhood of the hospital until at last, with twilight fading, she found herself in Earl's Court Road. Wasn't it somewhere near here that Margery Seymour lived? Something Mansions? Margery was always swanking about it, any old way. "We live in such an awfully nice neighbourhood, don't you know," she would mince. Funny thing the way girls like Margery Seymour would go on the stage and then spend all their time being ladies. All the same, now that Ivy was in the hospital it would have been nice to live somewhere round here. It wouldn't make it any easier for her to see Ivy, but she would feel nearer to her. It was more the idea of it than anything.

"I suppose I ought to be getting back to Alverton Street."

The thought appalled her.

"But I can't go walking round the houses all night."

She found herself passing a public-house. Perhaps it would buck her up a bit if she had a Guinness. But all by herself? She couldn't go into a public-house by herself. JUGS AND BOTTLES she read on a side door. She went in and found herself at the far end of a bar counter screened by a partition from the public and private bars.

"Yes, mum?" enquired a brawny tapster.

"A half-bottle of gin, please."

"Sweetened?"

"Yes, please."

Never had 26 Alverton Street looked so sinister in the bleak light of the arc lamp as it looked that night.

"Yes, Margery Seymour's right to swank about living in Something Mansions, Earl's Court," she said to herself bitterly.

Upstairs in the desolation of the first floor still smelling

of the fumigation she poured herself out a glass of gin and sat brooding.

"My god, I never did that before," she exclaimed, in sudden disapproval of herself when, the half-bottle finished a few hours later, she made the effort to go to bed. "Oh well, I was feeling terribly depressed, and it really did do me a little bit of good."

CHAPTER FOUR

MARGERY SEYMOUR

“JACK the Giant Killer’s waiting for you in the court,” one of the girls had told Margery Seymour that June evening. Margery was deedly asking the stage-door keeper if he was *sure* there wasn’t a letter for her. She was expecting a very important letter. It was Margery’s habit thus to call attention to herself every night after the show in the hope that somebody with influence in the theatre would hear her and enquire who that girl was with the dark eyebrows. Margery’s eyebrows would have been a worry to most girls; but Margery, on the principle of always being pleased with herself and with everything and everybody to do with her, had long ago decided to believe that her dark heavy eyebrows gave her face a peculiar distinction.

Jack the Giant Killer, whose attendance upon her had thus been notified, was the nickname of the girls for Margery’s brother, who was hardly any bigger than Margery herself, a dapper youth of twenty and a year younger than his sister. Margery did not approve of the nickname, but she was afraid to protest in case the girls found a much more derogatory and possibly vulgar nickname for him.

“Oh, is he out there, Clarice? Oh, thank you so much for telling me. I was just asking about a most frightfully important letter I was expecting to-night. But, alas for poor me, it doesn’t seem to have arrived.”

While she was talking Margery's smoke-grey deedy eyes were darting rapidly round the hall of the stage-door to note if anybody that might be impressed and was worth impressing was within hearing.

"Haven't you had your important letter, Miss Seymour?" she heard Lucy Arnold's cool, contemptuous and odiously common voice ask. "What a shame! Never mind, I expect he'll pawn his evening dress to-morrow and buy himself a penny stamp."

Margery tossed her head as Lucy Arnold passed out with Gladys West through the swing-door.

"Some people think letters are a joke, George," she observed to the stage-door keeper.

"They wouldn't if they had to sort them out for a hundred of you terrible girls," he replied with melancholy emphasis.

Jack Seymour was much more of a favourite with the girls at the Orient than his sister was, and she found him at the bottom of the court surrounded by half a dozen of the tall show-girls who were such an important feature of the processions with which the dancing in the ballet was from time to time relieved—full-breasted, befeathered, stately creatures, not one of whom was under five feet ten inches.

"Oh, don't take him away from us, Margery," they besought her in mock despair. "Leave him with us, Margery, and we'll undress him and put him to bed and see he's a good boy."

Jack Seymour strutted like a bantam cockerel among a lot of Golden Wyandotte hens. They might laugh at him in chorus, but there was not one of them who would not have been glad to be chosen by him for more particular attention.

"Well, girls, I've got to see my sister home now. Good night. Be good, all of you, and if you can't be good be careful."

"Oh, isn't he a naughty boy?"

"Oh, what a way to talk to ladies!"

"Margery, I'm surprised at you not being more strict with your young brothah."

The laughter of the tall show girls died away behind them as the brother and sister turned into Regent Street to walk along to the Piccadilly Tube.

"The mater was anxious you should get back early to-night," Jack told his sister. "She's got a special supper for us."

"Why, darling? Why a special supper to-night?"

"Well, as a matter of fact it's because a telegram came just after you left for the theatre to say that Prince Zielenberg wants me to box for him in Vienna. It's a three-year job and it'll mean that you and the mater will be able to come out and keep house for me."

"Oh, Jack, I am so glad for your sake, but . . ." she hesitated. She was asking herself if, with all these rumours flying around about the future of the Orient, she should be wise to go as far away as Austria. "But, Jack, wouldn't it be better if mother and I waited a bit to see how you liked it? You'd feel freer at first without us on your hands."

"I don't specially want you," said Jack with fraternal directness. "It's the mater who's so keen to come out."

The noise of the Tube prevented further discussion, for which Margery was grateful, because she did not want to commit herself yet to a positive opinion about the future opened up by Jack's Austrian engagement.

Fopstone Mansions, where Mrs. Seymour lived with her son and daughter, though Jack had only been much at home since his training as a featherweight finished, was one of the many blocks of flats built during the first craze for flat-building in London at the beginning of

the 'nineties. Presumably such blocks of flats were called mansions to suggest a combination of grandeur, stability, and respectability. All over West London the pattern varied little. They were all rectangular buildings of red brick decorated with the hideous stonework of the period. Lifts were unknown in those first blocks of flats, and in the competition for such residences it was seldom worth the owner's while to go to the expense of installing them. When lifts became a regular amenity of later building the boasted convenience of living in a flat was not always apparent to those who had climbed over a hundred stone stairs to visit their supposedly more fortunate friends. In those days before the War the rents of such flats, ludicrously low as they would come to seem, were considered very high, and a top flat in Fopstone Mansions at eighty pounds a year was as undeniable a sign of the grandeur, stability, and respectability of its tenants as any dwelling could confer. Mrs. Seymour, throughout her mysterious life, always invited the limelight of a good address. Fopstone Mansions, Earl's Court, was a good address. It was an even better address when given as Fopstone Mansions, S.W., for that suggested South Kensington, which was what Earl's Court had always wanted to be, although it had not and still has not succeeded in doing more than incontrovertibly shaking off West Kensington.

Mrs. Seymour was a handsome if slightly battered blonde approaching fifty. She was like some photograph of a late Victorian beauty which has stood about without a frame on many mantelpieces. Her profile was still recognizably classic, but her complexion suffered from the long lack in the practice of maquillage which Victorian propriety had inflicted on Englishwomen. The result was a uniform lilac, the result of supposing that pink powder applied all over the face will give an

illusion of youth's roses. It was the tragedy of such women that they did not want to look as if they were made up, because the artificial prolongation of outward youthfulness was still considered the sign of immorality. Hence the fear of what was called painting the face and this pathetic hope that pink powder reinforced by a light touch of dry rouge from a hare's foot would escape the notice of a censorious world. Occasionally people would comment on the darkness of Mrs. Seymour's children. Was it not extraordinary, she would agree. And if they had seen her when she was a girl it would have seemed even more extraordinary.

"I'm comparatively dark myself now. But until I was seventeen I had the palest of pale flaxen hair, and then it turned to its present colour."

It was still fair enough.

This carefully preserved golden hair was a symbol. It represented Mrs. Seymour's past of angelic innocence, into which what was vaguely referred to as "trouble" had cruelly forced a way. If she was ambiguous about her own past, she was much more ambiguous about that of the father of her children. Not even they had ever been able to extract from her whether he was still alive. When pressed she would declare with tragic resignation that he was dead to them. There were a good many photographs of men about the flat, most of them wearing the tell-tale headgear of the 'eighties, but they were all, according to Mrs. Seymour, friends of their father. None of them was named as their father himself.

Yet, in spite of so much uncertainty about the position, age, origin, and whereabouts of Mr. Seymour, he was used in the upbringing of the children as a standard of moral excellence. Indeed he took the place accorded to Almighty God in most nurseries as the invisible critic of childish behaviour. The most trivial breach of

manners became serious through its effect on their father. Elbows on the table, a disinclination to finish a helping of cabbage, the wasteful crumbling of bread, stretching, pointing, staring, lolling, fidgeting, all these were particularly objectionable to the nebulous Mr. Seymour.

"I really don't know what your father would say, Jack, if he saw all that fat on the edge of your plate. There is nothing he dislikes more than wasting good food."

"Margery dear, it would upset your father very much if he saw the way you will tug at your stockings. He cannot bear to see holes in the knees of little girls' stockings."

Mrs. Seymour brought up her two children with such strict attention to the niceties of polite behaviour that it may have been her command of discipline which led to the gossip current at one time about her having been a governess to the family of a rich brewer and seduced by the eldest son. Those who held this theory pointed out that when Jack became a professional boxer his first backer was an intimate friend of that very same eldest son.

At all events, gossip had to admit that, whoever Mrs. Seymour was and whatever Mrs. Seymour's early career had been, she had brought up her children admirably, and that in consenting to let Jack become a boxer and Margery a dancer she had shown a most praiseworthy determination not to give herself airs. In this regard she went no farther than occasionally deplored the commonness of the girls with whom Margery's lot was cast, and she would often express a wistful hope that Jack's innate gentlemanliness would not be utterly destroyed by his associates.

"Still, my children have to earn their living, and I made up my mind long ago to face that fact and impress

it on them. It was tempting to send Jack to a good public school, but it would not have been fair to the boy. And when Margery had shown such promise at the dancing-school she attended I thought it would have been the merest snobbery to refuse to let her accept an engagement at the Orient. At least it has given the dear child the pleasure of buying her own clothes and of not being dependent on the very small allowance I could afford to make her. Good breeding is proof against the influence of the ring or the *coulisses*, and thank heaven, my children are thoroughbreds."

When Jack and Margery paused for a moment about half-way up the stone stairs that led to the top flats in Fopstone Mansions, their mother's voice floated down the well in tones of tender enquiry.

"Is that you, children?"

They looked up over the balustrade to reassure that anxious yellow head, and when they reached the landing outside their own flat she was standing at the head of the stairs to greet them.

"Welcome, treasures both, on this wonderful, wonderful evening," she exclaimed, the deepness of her voice and the dignity of her bearing preventing her words from sounding ridiculous. "Champagne and oysters," she added on a note rivalling the sombre richness of a violoncello, as she led the way into the flat where every electric light was shaded with rosy lace and silk. Mrs. Seymour still affected in the evening the *negligé* costume known as the tea-gown, fashionable fifteen years or more earlier, and this, too, was all rosy lace and silk like the lampshades.

In the softly illuminated hall, when the front door had been closed, Mrs. Seymour embraced fondly her offspring in turn.

"Precious boy! Precious girl!" she cooed profoundly. "How blessed I am in such beloved children!"

The dining-room in the flat of Fopstone Mansions was a memorial of a visit once paid by Mrs. Seymour to Japan before Jack and Margery were born. It was always referred to in the second person plural. "When we had our first glimpse of Fujiyama," or "When we spent that delicious month among the cherry blossom." But nobody ever heard how many people "we" stood for, nor who those people were. There are not many more depressing ways of decorating the room of a London flat built in the early 'nineties than with the spoils of a journey to Japan, and there is certainly no method of illumination which brings out the depressing effect of carved ivory and ebony, of indiscriminate lacquer, and of coloured photographs of Japanese scenes like lampshades of rosy lace and silk. Yet a dining-table laid with bright silver, a dish of oysters, triangles of brown bread and butter, and slices of lemon, and with two bottles of champagne standing in coolers at the corners can do much to mitigate the depressing effect of such a room.

"I say, mater, you have been going it," her son commented.

"But I could not get any ice. The fishmonger was right out of ice. I've kept the champagne standing on the sill of your bedroom, precious boy, all the evening, and it *ought* not to be tepid. I opened all the oysters myself. Mr. Wicking offered to send them round ready opened. But I always like to be sure with oysters, and the only way to be *sure* with oysters is to open them yourself."

Mrs. Seymour took her place at the head of the table, and after clasping for a moment the hands of her son and daughter in a kind of benediction she begged them to do justice to her celebration.

"It's wonderful, son o' mine, to think of your bright future. I never met Prince Zielenberg in the old days,

and I've passed so completely out of society during the last twenty years of struggling to give my precious children their chance that I should never dream of mentioning to him the names of several mutual friends in the days of *auld lang syne*. Besides, I have a horror of mixing one's private affairs with one's profession. And you are a professional boxer, my Jackieboy. I feel sure that Mr. Rodmore would never have recommended Prince Zielenberg to engage you unless he were satisfied that you were a good professional boxer." Mrs. Seymour filled her glass, and raised it to salute her son. "My darling, your mother wishes that every match you fight you will win."

"Well, that's wishing rather too much, mater," said Jack. "Nobody can win every fight."

"You can, son o' mine, and you *will*," she declared dramatically, her classic profile asserting itself above the peroxided hair and the lilac complexion and lending to her something of the heroic maternity of a *Cornelia* or a *Veturia*. Then she turned to her daughter.

"And I drink to your success, my darling. May you find yourself one day a *prima ballerina assoluta!*"

Margery seized the opportunity.

"I think the days for great dancers are past, mumsy. I think dancing will be just an extra accomplishment in the future. There's a very strong rumour at the theatre that *Aphrodite* is to be the last of the Orient ballets and that the management are going to try revue. And I think I stand a good chance of a part in the autumn."

"If you are here in the autumn, darling. But my little plan was to go out to Austria and look after our dear Jack, and for you to obtain a dancing engagement in Vienna. If Jack is successful out there

as a boxer he will be sure to meet all sorts of theatrical people and be able to get you some good introductions."

"Mumsy, I don't want to set myself up against you in the very least," her daughter said. "But don't you think it might be better for Jack to be on his own at first and then, when he has found his feet, for us to join him later?"

Margery looked across the table at her brother, her smoke-grey deedy eyes appealing almost passionately for his support. She was sure that he did not want his debut in Austria to be hampered by a mother and a sister. But would he have the courage to withstand his mother?

Would she herself have the courage to withstand her, if it came to a real clash? Margery shivered at the thought of facing the complications of existence without her help. Outside this quiet pink-flushed dining-room lay the noisy bleak insecurity of the eternal struggle to get on. If her mother was set on accompanying Jack she would never dare stay behind alone.

"Well, mater, it's this way," Jack was saying. "I'd like to see for a bit how I get on before you break up the flat."

"But of course I should never dream of breaking up the flat," said Mrs. Seymour. "That is the advantage of a flat. It can be closed indefinitely. I might possibly find some trustworthy tenants for it. There is no immediate hurry. I am not proposing that Margery and I should come out with you immediately. You will have to start in two or three days. We can follow you when we have settled everything here."

"But if they do produce a revue at the Orient in the autumn and if I were offered a part," said

Margery, "you wouldn't go out to Vienna and leave me?"

"The Orient has been a beginning for you, my darling; but I do not want you to remain indefinitely at the Orient. You yourself have told me repeatedly how very common the other girls are. Circumstances made it necessary that you should do everything possible to earn some money. And nobly have you done it, wonder child. But you must remember that you are not a typical ballet-girl, and it is my duty not to be selfish. I know how much you both appreciate all I have been able to do for you, but I have to guard against a mother's complacency. It would be so easy for me to stay here in this flat of which we have managed to make such a snug wee home, but I will not stay in it to my children's detriment. Jack is launched upon the road to fame and fortune, but he is young and he needs his mother still. My duty is plain. You, my beloved Margery, have made a good beginning, but I never contemplated your staying on at the Orient indefinitely. This little supper we are enjoying together is intended to celebrate still more glorious victories in the future."

Margery surrendered. Whatever her mother should decide she would offer no opposition.

Perhaps Mrs. Seymour did not feel as confident as she wanted to feel about her daughter's subordination to her plans. At any rate, when Margery was in bed she came into her room, in her dressing-gown more like a Roman mother than ever.

"My precious one," she began in those deep cooing tones which ever since Margery could remember had seemed the very voice of wisdom itself. "I could not in front of our beloved Jack say quite all I had in mind when I decided to sacrifice my own comfort by joining him in Vienna. You are twenty-one and you must

have some idea by now, after your time at the Orient, of the seamy side of human nature. However, whether you have or not, you must take your mother's word for it that the life of a young boxer on the continent is exposed to every kind of moral danger. It is much too unpleasant a topic for me to enlarge upon, but if I remind you of the kind of temptation to which girls are exposed at a theatre like the Orient you will have to imagine for yourself the kind of temptation to which a good-looking and extremely attractive boy like Jack might be exposed to abroad. My presence, even if I remain almost entirely in the background, will be an invaluable protection to him."

"Yes, I think I do know what you mean, mother."

"Then you understand why I do not think he should be left to himself in a foreign country. But we also have you to think about, Margiegirl. Frankly I do not see you making the success you deserve at the Orient. You require more *intime* surroundings. You are too teeny-weeny for that huge barn of a theatre. I daresay you will not find it easy to get an engagement at once in Vienna. But does that matter? You will meet people. This is your opportunity. Most people save money for a rainy day. I have saved a little money for a sunny day. And Jack's engagement by Prince Zielenberg to box for him for three years is our sunny day, on which we must make hay. Mr. Right has not come along yet, birdie. But Mr. Right is much more likely to come along in Vienna than to the stage-door of the Orient."

Mrs. Seymour leaned over and kissed Margery good night.

The habit of believing that her mother knew better than herself reasserted itself more strongly than ever when Margery was alone with her thoughts. She looked back

at her time in the corps de ballet, at the sameness of it night after night. She had done all she could to attract the attention of the management; but she had never once been chosen to deputize for one of the principals. She was always being told by the other girls to consider herself lucky that she was in the first line of boys. They always let her suppose she had gained even that position by persistently calling attention to herself rather than by the excellence of her dancing. And mother was right. They *were* deplorably common. It could not be good for one to be thrown perpetually with such common girls. And anyway there was nothing certain about this revue. It might never be produced. There was even less certainty that she would have a part in it, or that if she had a part it would be anything more than an odd word or two, and perhaps a dance in a pas de quatre. Yes, it would be better to leave the Orient. The other girls would be surprised when she gave in her notice. They would wonder if she was going to be married.

Marriage?

Well, marriage by Orient standards was not much. Oh yes, it was time she left. Rita Vitali had been abroad a good deal. She would tell her something to-morrow about Vienna. Rita was the nicest of the girls in Room 45. She might ask Rita to come to tea. No, marriage by Orient standards was not much. She had said nothing to her mother about that girl Jenny Pearl. She had thought it might upset the supper she had arranged to celebrate Jack's good fortune. Besides, she had never known Jenny Pearl. All the same, it was a sort of warning, that death of hers, a warning to leave the Orient. Of course mother was right. What a marvellous woman she was! She was always right. Perhaps now she had spoken as she had just now about Jack she would not mind if she were asked something about father. Mother

had seemed to recognize to-night that her daughter was grown up. Vienna might be lovely . . . she would ask Rita Vitali about it . . . and perhaps Rita might come to tea one day . . . she wasn't nearly so common as the other girls in Room 45.

Margery turned over and was soon asleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

RITA VITALI

WHEN Rita Vitali was walking from the Orient to the Leicester Square tube-station quite a dozen men looked back at her over their shoulders in the hope that so graceful and so beautiful a creature was a professional lover and that their hunting on this fine June night was at last to be rewarded by the ideal romantic adventure often dreamed of but never experienced. One glimpse of that straight slim back was enough to convince most of the hunters that so purposeful a gait did not belong to amorous errantry. Yet two or three turned round and followed her optimistically in the hope that she would linger by the shop-window of Stagg and Mantle's to allow herself to be accosted. One indomitable male continued the chase past the Empire, past the little chapel where nuns adore perpetually the Blessed Sacrament, without observing that his quarry crossed herself as she went by that sacred spot, and even managed to squeeze himself behind Rita into the queue at the window of the booking-office where, hearing her ask for a ticket to Golders Green, he gave up the pursuit at the cost of a penny ticket for himself to Tottenham Court Road, which he threw away in the gutter.

The train was crowded at first, but after leaving Chalk Farm few passengers were left for the last three stations, and Rita looking up from the paper in which she had been reading over and over again the account of Jenny Pearl's death beheld herself darkly in the windows opposite as the only figure at that end of the coach. The reflection of the human form in a well may be the only

one which can endow it with as much glamour of renewed youth as the reflection of it in the windows of a tube-train. Rita was startled for the moment by the apparition of herself as she was ten years ago. Not that she had the least cause to complain of the way time had treated the perfect oval of her countenance. At thirty-two she was perhaps more lovely than she had ever been. Yet the fatigue of a long evening at the Orient inevitably cast shadows beneath those lustrous almond eyes just slanted. In removing her make-up, the first fine crows-feet, the first faint puckering of the eyelids, could not but be noticed, and here and there round that full bow of a mouth, however firm and red the lips, the bloom of the skin was rubbed. It was that bloom which the dark mirror of the train-windows restored to her countenance, flattering no doubt but comforting withal.

Yet of what avail was beauty now? She frowned at the implication of such a question, and as she frowned she looked across at that other self darkly mirrored in the tunnel's monotone. Her beauty would outlast Edward's passionate love. He would be sixty-two in another five years, and she, allowing for the flattery of those windows, would look little older than she did now. Poor Edward, he had assured her the day their marriage had been arranged—really by her parents—that he had deprived her by his seniority of youth's perfect fulfilment. And of course it would be idle to pretend that she had cared for him except as a kind, an overwhelmingly kind friend. It was ironical that from such a mating the fruit should be Blanche and Bianca. When Elsie Crauford had borne twins to her ridiculous Artie the event had been the joke of the dressing-room for months; but when she had borne twins to Edward they had been the envy and the admiration of every girl in the theatre. They had always been *her* twins. Poor Edward's share in those dark-eyed golden-haired exquisite miniatures

had never seemed to count for anything. He was hardly allowed even as much importance where they were concerned as a grandfather. They were seven years old now, and every day they grew more beautiful. So to sit looking at herself in that dark flattering glass and ask herself of what avail was her own beauty was the merest impudence of vanity. Perhaps it was the shock of Jenny Pearl's swift and tragic end which had troubled her contentment. She remembered saying to her once that if she and Maurice had not been so utterly in love with one another she might have been tempted to fall in love with him herself. Perhaps not another girl at the Orient could have said that to Jenny without being blasted by a scathing witticism; but from her Jenny had accepted the confession as simply and frankly as it had been made. Jenny had replied immediately that Maurice had told her once the only other girl in the theatre with whom he could have imagined the possibility of falling madly in love was Rita Vitali. And no doubt it had been the failure of Maurice to sustain the romantic perfection with which both Jenny and she had endowed him that when the love affair was broken up had kept her from ever mentioning Maurice's name to Jenny again. Yet suppose it really was better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all? It was Bill Fur who had written that in her autograph book, and what a scream it had been in the dressing-room when she read out to the girls what he had written. It was long since they had seen Bill Fur sitting in the stalls, Bill Fur, the middle-aged schoolmaster who used to come for the week-end from Margate, Bill Fur with his glasses which were always falling over his scraggy nose and the moth-eaten fur coat which provided him with a nickname. Bill Fur with his bags of bananas and grapes and oranges which were always such a scream. He had fallen in love unsuccessfully with a dozen of the girls, though Jenny had always

been his first choice and therefore the one who had played him up more cruelly than any of the others. Probably he was thinking of Jenny when he had written that in her autograph book. And perhaps it was true that Jenny had had the great love affair; and then after it was finished she had married. If what the paper said was right Maurice had come into her life again. With a baby boy now she must have been tormented to know what to do. And then she had been killed. Rita crossed herself and murmured a prayer for her dead friend. Perhaps it had been God's mercy which had taken her away from the torment of choosing between her baby boy and her old lover. It was a sin for herself to be regretting now that she had missed the ecstasies of passionate love. God had been good to her. Would she abandon Blanche and Bianca for the most glorious lover in the world?

Rita shook her head emphatically, and opposite in that mirror the phantom of her youth shook its head as if in agreement. Yes, perhaps the tragedy of Jenny's death was a happy ending really. Nobody would ever know what old age had made of her. In the minds of those who remembered her she would live for ever young until they in their due time followed her to the grave. It was true that after the break between her and Maurice she had lost some of her gaiety, but one recalled that only with an effort. The picture of her that sprang at once to the memory was of a skin as smooth as coral, of a straight little nose, of a small mouth with very crimson lips, of slant laughing eyes deeper than sapphires and flecked with grey and green, of a figure lithe and slender-seeming as a wand, of unquenchable Cockney wit and laughter, of an incarnate spirit of London youth. It was good to think now that all the time Jenny was at the Orient they had never quarrelled. She could remember the first week Jenny had come to the Orient from

Drury Lane and Covent Garden at the same time as Irene Dale. Those two had quarrelled. And Jenny had quarrelled with Madge Wilson, but not with her.

She herself had been how long now at the Orient? Fourteen years last spring! She had actually been there years before Jenny came, and it was beginning to look as if she would remain there for years after Jenny was dead . . . unless this rumour that the ballet was to be disbanded proved to be true. That would mean the end of herself at the Orient. She would be no use in modern revue. From the time she had been ten years old she had been a dancer in the great tradition, one of Aldavini's best pupils. What had kept her from moving up to the top? She had danced for half a dozen famous ballerinas when they had been unable to appear, and everybody had said that she was as good a dancer as any of them. But the ballerinas had always come back to their places and she had always gone back to the first line of boys. Sometimes there had been hints of a pas seul specially put in for her in the next ballet; but somehow that pas seul had never materialized. It had always been the pas seul of somebody else she had been called upon to dance. What was it which had kept her in the rank and file of the corps de ballet? Perhaps it was the lack of some quality in her dancing, which a passionate love affair would have given to it. Perhaps her dancing was too correct, so that it communicated to the audience a sense of coldness. Oh well, it was too late now to think of curing that. Much, much too late. And anyway one could not help feeling that the old-fashioned ballet was finished. Dancing would go on, of course; but after people saw the Russians at Covent Garden and after Pavlova's success at the Palace the English ballet began to seem a back number. Well, in a way people were right. The English ballet was like some old

coloured supplement one saw framed. It was pretty, but it was out of date. And that gave the idea that it wasn't alive. It would be nice to open a school like Madame Aldavini's and try to start English girls in the right way. Old Madame Aldavini had been too impatient. She was so much concerned with the correctness of the style and the accuracy of the step and the need to take your strength in the right way from the back and not from the teeth as so many girls did that she never used to make the least attempt to develop the personalities and the temperaments of her pupils. She used to assume that English girls were without either and merely capable of being trained into good machines. Yet, when you looked at English acrobatic dancing it was the best in the world. You couldn't beat the Tiller girls in their own style. Well, what could be done with the Tiller girls could surely be done with English ballet-dancing. It would be fun to open a dancing-school and make the experiment. What was going to happen if the corps de ballet at the Orient was disbanded? It would be no use moving to the Empire or the Alhambra. If the Orient ballet went the others were not likely to remain much longer. And anyway there was something repulsive in going on dancing after a certain age. Try how you might you couldn't keep your calves from getting massive. And your arms were bound to coarsen—or shrink, which was worse. If she had a school of her own she could teach Blanche and Bianca. They ought to start in another year or two now. But she wouldn't be content for them to learn dancing only. They must be able to act and sing equally as well. Then perhaps they might become famous. The Rita Sisters? That wouldn't be a bad name. They might top the bill one day. Perhaps it was silly dreaming to oneself like this in the Tube, but they were such lovely kids and mongrels were always clever. Well,

they'd be a good mixture: French father, Dutch grandmother on one side, Italian grandfather and English grandmother, and Russian or really Jewish great-grandmother on the other side. Talk about a procession of all nations, Blanche and Bianca were that, and no mistake. The tube train had left Hampstead Station behind and was running with a sudden quiet in the open air towards Golders Green. Her reflection in the window opposite had faded to a blur now that the tunnel had come to an end.

It was a good ten minutes' walk from the station to the little semi-detached villa at the corner of one of the newly built rows of semi-detached villas that within a few years would transform what was still a good imitation of the country into a populous and comparatively near at hand suburb. Edward was always bemoaning the speed with which Golders Green was being built up, and often said they should have moved much farther away from the heart of London than they had when his old mother died five years ago and they forsook the upper half of that house in Soho in which the first years of her married life had been spent. Rita had liked being in Soho, and it had been very convenient for her and Edward, equally near to the theatre and to the dingy little shop in that dingy little street off Golden Square where Laronce and Sons dealt in diamonds. Edouard Colin had been with Laronce and Sons so long, first at their branch in Amsterdam and then in London, that he had become as dingy as the shop itself. Rita used to think, when sometimes she called for him in Trout Lane, how strange it was that the business of buying and selling diamonds should possess less outward glitter than any business she knew. It was associated in her mind with two or three old or middle-aged men in shiny black alpaca coats moving cautiously about behind a high counter and opening safes from which they took small velvet bags, at the

contents of which they peered more cautiously than ever through magnifying glasses that gave the wearers the look of fishes. Her father Orazio Vitali, or as he preferred to call himself after he was naturalized as a British subject, Horace Vitali, had been one of Laronce's messengers, travelling backwards and forwards between London and various cities on the Continent. She had first met Edward as a girl of fourteen while she was still a pupil at Madame Aldavini's school in Great Queen Street. He had wanted to marry her before she went to the Orient, and her father and mother had been most anxious that she should. However, she had managed to postpone marriage for four years, and all those four years she had been expecting the irruption into her life of some romantic lover whose influence would make it impossible for her to fall in with her parents' wishes. But the romantic lover had never appeared, and when she was twenty-two she had married Edward Colin, who was by then a man of forty-seven. They had lived at first with his mother, an old Dutchwoman who had been somewhat tiresome as a mother-in-law, but who had taught Rita how to keep house. A year or two after the twins were born the old lady had died, and Edward with the half of the legacy he thus inherited bought the house at the corner of Meadvale Gardens, which at that date had no more than half a dozen houses fit for habitation. It used to be something of an adventure returning home from the theatre on dark nights, but now already there was not one open field left between Meadvale Gardens and Golders Green Station, and there was pavement all the way.

Edouard Colin was sitting up for his wife's return from the theatre, and as soon as he heard the latch of the gate click he hurried into the kitchen to dish up the supper he always prepared for her with a Frenchman's reverence for good food. He was now a man of

fifty-seven, but he looked older, with his lank grey moustache and scanty grey hair and hunched shoulders and little velvet cap and hands speckled with age's brown rust.

Before she sat down to her supper Rita went upstairs to glance at the children, who slept in a small room between their parents and the spare bedroom. Their mother would have liked to turn on the electric light that she might feast herself upon their beauty, but she contented herself with gazing down at them asleep by the light coming through the door from the passage. Their dark lustrous eyes were closed, but the exquisite dark arches of their eyebrows looked fantastic enough beneath those ringlets of spun gold. Blanche was lying on her left side, Bianca upon her right, and by accident both were sleeping in the same attitude, so that the effect was of two amoretti in an old Italian picture. In the deep breaths of sleep their mouths quivered like petals.

Rita left them to darkness again with reluctance, and as always when she saw her husband after looking at the twins she had to stare at him in amazement at his fatherhood.

"What have I which you look at?" he asked.

She kissed the tips of two fingers and patted his sunken cheeks.

"Such a lovely supper, Edward. That's what I was looking at," she assured him, with a smile of affection. "Did you work late in the garden?"

"Until an hour after sunfall. I was planting out the hortensias. I think we can say now there will be no frosts."

"Was there much business in Trout Lane?"

"No business at all. I think people have no more money to buy diamonds. Monsieur Henri said to me he did not know what we will do presently because we

have so much capital locked up in stones we cannot sell."

"Did you read the paper this evening?"

"No, I was reading the catalogue of Lemoine to find what lilacs we can plant next autumn."

Rita told her husband about Jenny Pearl. His eyes filled with tears.

"*Pauvre petite ! pauvre petite !* That makes me bad, Rita."

He rose from the table and went over to the open window by which for a while he sat in pensive silence, gazing out at the lurid stain of London upon the southern sky. When Rita had finished her supper she came across to join him sitting upon the arm of his chair. He took her sweet slim hand in his own that was so much discoloured by the rust of age.

"So many times, Rita, I have reproached myself that I have stolen life away from you," he said painfully. "So many many times. It was an egoism in me for which I merited to be punished, but the good God for a purpose of His own has allowed me instead a happiness I could not tell to you in French and assuredly not in English. Say to me, *ma bien aimée*, that you have not so very often regretted for me to be your husband."

"You know I haven't, Edward. You've always been terribly kind to me."

"Yes, yes, *petite femme*, but I could not give you more than an old man's kindness. I could not give you the passion for which youth has so much envy."

"Passion isn't everything. Look at Jenny. Nobody could have been more wildly in love than she was, and look where it has brought her, poor kid."

"It was just of Jenny Pearl that I was thinking. We call hers a tragedy, but perhaps the tragedy would have been for her to live on married to that older man. I

remember very well the day she came here and told us about him. I made a pretence to be not wounded by what she said, but I have never forgot the contempt for herself she seemed to be feeling when she spoke to us of her marriage, and so many times since I have asked if in your heart, Rita, you have a contempt for yourself because you have married me."

She shook her head.

"Don't worry yourself, Edward. Do you think I'm ashamed of Blanche and Bianca?"

"And it is of them we must now always think, Rita. Figure to yourself what it would be if something like this should happen to *la petite Blanche* or *la piccola Bianca*. When I hear of such a thing as you have told me about Jenny Pearl I feel quite a horror that I have helped to bring into the world two more little girls. Still, it is not of them I think most to-night, but of you, Rita. I have said to myself that if destiny had decided to involve you in a fatal passion I might have been tempted like this miserable man who now must die. I see to the depth of my own egoism and I turn away in disgust from the sight. You think perhaps I say this for talk, but I swear to you that I would have been capable once of killing you like that out of despair because I could not make you so much mine as I was wanting. I hope I have conquered such horrible things in myself."

"And don't forget I'm thirty-two, darling," she said with a lightness of mockery she was not really feeling; but the sweat of extreme emotion was damp upon Edward's brow and she hoped to quieten him.

"You are thirty-two, but you are beautiful still as the child I loved. And I say you now from my heart, Rita, that if you meet a man who can give to you such a *grande passion* I could not give to you you must not run away from it. I have conquered jealousy in myself and I do not wish for you to have a pity for me. I do not wish to

be a soft and miserable impediment in the path of your destiny."

"You have worked yourself up, darling, haven't you? All right, if I meet this young dream I'll forget all about my poor old man and enjoy myself on the roundabouts."

"I am serious, Rita."

"Yes, but I haven't met him yet. When I do I'll let you know, and then you can give me permish to be really naughty. But I want to be serious now, Edward, as we're settling our future. I want to leave the Orient when this ballet finishes. As a matter of fact I daresay the Orient will leave me, because if it's true they're going to start in doing revue I daresay they'll give me the sack. Still, even if they did offer for me to stay on I don't want to. I've been there fourteen years, and that's a long sentence, isn't it? I don't want to take off my make-up one night and look at myself in the glass and say 'my god, you old tear!' And I certainly don't want the management to say it first. I'd like the girls to say, 'What a pity Rita Vitali left! She was such a lovely dancer, and she was quite young when she left.'"

"Why, of course you must leave the Orient if you are feeling so," Edouard told his wife.

"Yes, but Edward, I wouldn't want to leave the Orient just to go and take an engagement at the Empire or the Alhambra, or perhaps go on in a special act at the Coliseum or even the Palace. If I leave the Orient I want to leave the stage altogether."

"Oh, certainly, my dear Rita, you can leave the stage. But are you wise? Might not you be a victim of ennui? You must remember that except when the theatre has been closed and we have made our little journeys across the channel for a holiday and when the children were born you have hardly missed a night at the Orient during all these years. Can you imagine to yourself what it will mean if you find yourself at home

always like all the women we behold round us in Golders Green?"

"Ah, but that's what I'm coming to," she said eagerly. "I don't want to give up work altogether. But I want to start a dancing-school. Now that old Madame Aldavini has retired and her place in Great Queen Street has been pulled down there isn't really any good school for teaching the old strict way of dancing, and though I suppose that like everything else the ballet will change, it's the grounding which counts and I *could* give girls that."

Carried away by the excitement of her theme, Rita spoke so fast that her husband had to beg her once or twice to repeat herself.

"You make me feel as when I first came to England and could not hear what I was said," he protested.

"Blanche and Bianca are sure to want to go on the stage, and they could be almost my first pupils," Rita went on eagerly.

"But perhaps they will be solemn old dogs like their father," said Edouard.

"Well, it won't do them any harm to give them the chance of an early training. It won't mean much money. I'd just have to find a nice large room somewhere in Soho, or perhaps at the back of the Tottenham Court Road, or even off Long Acre, though I think nearer Leicester Square would be best. And then I'd want a brass plate 'Madame Vitali's School of Dancing.' I'd easily get one of the Orient girls to come as an assistant. Maudie Chapman knows her job. And she's very good-tempered and jolly. She's not likely to stick at the Orient unless the ballet stays as it is now, and even then she might like to teach for a change. She said to me the other night she was beginning to get tired of the same old getting nowhere year after year. She came there four years after me when she was only seventeen. She's getting two pounds a week, and I thought I could give

her that and a small commission for the pupils she introduced. Oh Edward, do say you think it's a good idea. I'm getting two pounds ten at the Orient. Surely I can soon earn more than that. All the girls will tell other girls, and they'll help at the club. I'm sure this is the right moment to make a start."

"*Bien*," Edouard agreed. "I will pay the rent for you."

She kissed his forehead.

"You are good to me," she murmured.

"*Mais je t'aime, mon amour, mon ange.*"

Rita could not sleep for a long while so much excited was she by the prospect of the future. She was far from the countrified silence of the Golders Green night, hurrying round the various streets where there would be a chance of finding a suitable room for her school. It ought to be high up if possible, because it was healthier for the kids. Oh, and she had forgotten to remind Edward that it might be necessary to lay a parquet floor. Could he afford to find the money for that? Oh, and of course the practice-rail! That would have to be put up all round for the kiddies to practise getting on their toes. And in choosing Maudie Chapman she had forgotten she must have somebody who could play the piano . . . the piano could be hired of course, not much outlay there . . . but she should hardly be able to afford an assistant teacher *and* an accompanist. If the pupils came in quickly she might be able to engage Maudie Chapman later, but an accompanist was absolutely necessary. The only girl in the theatre who played well enough for that was Queenie Danvers. And Queenie Danvers was a good dancer. In fact she could teach acrobatic dancing. She was really a better acrobatic dancer than she was a ballet dancer. Yet somehow Queenie was not the girl she would like as an accompanist. There was something sly about her, something a little malicious too. Would

it be possible to persuade Miss Carron who had been Madame Aldavini's accompanist and assistant-teacher to come into a partnership? Ah, but Miss Carron must be well over fifty now. She was probably tired of teaching. The uniform of Madame Vitali's School of Dancing should be . . . should be what? Madame Aldavini's girls had worn pink tarlatan skirts and black jerseys embroidered in front with a large pink A and black stockings clocked with pink. Madame Vitali's girls should have brown jerseys with yellow tarlatan skirts and brown stockings clocked with yellow, and a big yellow V embroidered on their jerseys. Blanche and Bianca would look admirable in such a uniform when in a year or two's time they began to come to the school once a week, then the following year twice a week, then three times a week, and when they were twelve every day. They could travel up with her and go to school somewhere close at hand. How lovely, how lovely it would be, travelling up from Golders Green with Blanche and Bianca . . . with Blanche and Bianca . . . travelling into sleep . . . with Blanche and Bianca. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

QUEENIE DANVERS

QUEENIE DANVERS had been at the Orient for over six years, always in the first line of boys, and so always in Room 45, but there was not a girl in the dressing-room who could have claimed to know her properly.

“Well, that Queenie Danvers!” Mrs. Pilkington had once exclaimed. “I don’t know, but I don’t seem to get no nearer to her than what I did to King George’s Corringation, and that was as far as the back of a drayman half as big as a house, oh, a proper porker, girls! Still waters run deep, they say, but Queenie Danvers *isn’t* still. In fact there *isn’t* a bigger fidget in the place, but don’t tell me she *isn’t* deep, because you’d only waste your breath if you did. Deep? I reckon she’s as deep as the very Juice himself.”

Queenie would often talk about boys she was supposed to be meeting; but in the whole of her time at the Orient nobody had ever seen a boy waiting for her in the court or on the pavement of Jermyn Street beyond. Her solitary triumph had been the attentions of a farouche Russian juggler nicknamed Fuzzy Bill by her companions, and that had been in her first year. Nor was she ever dressed as if she were going out anywhere after the show. She did not seem to care about clothes. For three winters, day in day out, she had worn the same tired brown overcoat with a seedy rabbit’s-fur collar and cuffs, and it had only been during this last spring that she had

been lured by Miss Chibbett's persuasive salesmanship to buy herself a double-breasted light check coat which the other girls supposed was going to last her another three springs and summers. Yet she was not to appearances desperately hard up. She was as willing as any girl to stand a quatern of gin or a Guinness. She was the tallest of the girls in the first line of boys, and perhaps the most energetic of them all. Her toe-dancing was not considered to accord with the grand tradition, but no girl was more lithe and accomplished when the dance departed from the classical tradition and trespassed upon music-hall acrobatics. This was not to be wondered at when it was remembered that her father was Dicky Danvers who fifteen years back had been an acrobatic dancer of outstanding merit and considered the finest harlequin of his time. Poor Dicky Danvers had had a bad accident in a trap-act at one of the big provincial theatres, so bad that he was never able to appear on the boards again and was now box-office clerk and general business utility man at a small North London music-hall.

Queenie was as swart as a gypsy, and with her black curly hair bobbed many years before bobbing came into fashion she was much more actually like a boy both on and off the stage than any of the first line of boys.

"I wonder where she's striding off to now," one of the girls standing in gossip by the stage-door said to her companions on this June night.

The group turned round to watch Queenie Danvers, untidy as a Chelsea painter, swinging along the court by herself and without a glance to right or left of her as she vanished round the corner.

No man looked back over his shoulder at Queenie Danvers when she made her way across Piccadilly and swung along up Shaftesbury Avenue to reach New

Oxford Street and stride on through Bloomsbury to Brunswick Square and thence down Hunter Street into Judd Street, where just before the Euston Road she turned off sharply to the left into Little Quondam Street, half-way along whose monotone of drab was the decaying early Victorian house of which she and her father occupied the upper half.

Queenie's route has been recorded with such prosaic detail to serve as a contrast to the thoughts of Queenie herself while she was thus striding along. She was a confirmed day-dreamer, and it was her habit to accomplish this return home night by night after the theatre in what was very nearly a walking trance. Except for her ability to avoid bumping into passers by or being run over when crossing the road, she was farther away from Shaftesbury Avenue and the rest of the streets and squares by which her route took her as space is measured than she was from the Antipodes. These fantasies she wove were never of love or marriage or sudden transformation into a star of the theatre: they were exclusively devoted to the kind of adventures that boys dream of more commonly than girls. These were the days before gangsters came into such prominence, before the war had given such an impetus to spy-tales, and before bandits had exploited the mobility of the motor-car. So Queenie's dreams of leading bushrangers and holding up trains in the Wild West, of being a brigand chief in Sicily or ruling a sinister island in the South Seas, will sound old-fashioned. Yet, inasmuch as the prime objective of all this villainy was to obtain money and so wield the power that money can confer, her dreams would have been up to date at any period. So vividly could she conjure herself into any position by fantasy that until now she had scorned to aid her dreams by playing a part in real life. In real life she had been content to wear for three winters a tired brown overcoat

with seedy rabbit's-fur collar and cuffs because her dreams had hitherto made her independent of such a dull garb. Nor, though sometimes tempted to weave long stories of imaginary adventures for her companions in the theatre, had she indulged herself in this, and if she had gained the reputation of being a liar it was for lying in a petty way, never in the grand style in which, had she tried, she could undoubtedly have excelled.

The news of Jenny Pearl's death had filled Queenie Danvers with a blind jealousy. She could not bear the thought that a former companion of her own should be the heroine of a murder case. That Jenny was dead could not cure the gnawing ache. By being murdered Jenny had achieved in reality what Queenie had only been able to dream of achieving. And it was while listening to the girls talking about Jenny Pearl that the bandit-chief had noticed Madge Wilson's turquoise bracelet lying in her make-up box and decided that the time for mere dreaming was gone. And it was the feel of that turquoise bracelet in the pocket of that light check coat she had bought from Miss Chibbett, but not yet paid for in full, that gave to Queenie's dreaming on this June night a year or two before the war a sense of triumphant actuality never attained before. She was genuinely a criminal at last, and that ambition being accomplished she could now hope to be an arch-criminal. She was not yet level with Jenny Pearl's achievement in getting murdered, but she had made a start.

Dicky Danvers had not come home when his daughter reached the house in Little Quondam Street where the two of them had lived since, when Queenie was still a child, Mrs. Danvers—Trixie Morton on the play-bills—had run off with a ventriloquist. Number 16 was as dingy externally as the rest of the houses in Little

Quondam Street, but the rooms occupied by Queenie Danvers and her father had acquired during the fifteen years of their tenancy the authentic atmosphere of home. They were comfortably overcrowded with knick-knacks, furniture, and pictures, for when Mrs. Danvers ran away from her husband he had sold up their house in Barnsbury, but had retained more than enough to fill the upper half of this small house which with the use of the kitchen in the basement he rented from the widow of a railway clerk, a Mrs. Holdship. There were four rooms, but the fourth was used as a box-room in which were stored in big theatrical hampers the stage wardrobe of Dicky Danvers. It had been a long time after the accident before the dancer had recognized that his career on the stage was finished, and one of the reasons for settling in Little Quondam Street had been the convenience of this fourth room for storing his wardrobe and properties until he should be well enough to use them again.

Those rooms of the last century, ugly and inconvenient though they may have been, used to possess a great deal of somewhat grubby somewhat stuffy comfort, the ability to produce which began to decline with the change of manners that set in after the death of Queen Victoria and had been completely lost by a few years later. Instead of the three-piece suite which looks so luxurious in advertisements, but which often hardly outlives the final instalment of hire-purchase, there were in this old London room two armchairs covered with shiny leather and a horsehair sofa reinforced by a mattress and a large travelling-rug. The hobgrate was surrounded by a guard solid enough to support one's legs, and the rag hearthrug was every bit as grateful to the feet as fur. The black and red checkered tablecloth glowed under the gaselier, one burner of which had been fitted with an incandescent mantle. Over the mantel-

piece was a gilt-edged mirror which prevented feeling cramped for space, and the mantelpiece itself was crowded with the souvenir mugs of various towns Dicky Danvers had collected on tour. On either side of the mirror hung a perpendicular line of tinsel prints, mostly of long dead harlequins, with one or two tragedians to add in spite of their garish attire a note of dignity. Above the mirror was suspended a harlequin's sabre crossed with a columbine's wand. Between the frame and the glass of the mirror were stuck a series of signed menu-cards and a number of old theatre programmes. The rest of the wall space was almost completely covered with photographs of actors, actresses, dancers, acrobats, music-hall performers, lion-tamers, and theatrical managers to which were added a few coloured prints of Regency days illustrating the adventures of the Modern Roscius, a large steel engraving of a firework-display at the Crystal Palace, and an equally large steel-engraving of Daniel Maclise's picture of the play-scene in *Hamlet*. A sizable mahogany glass-fronted bookcase served as a dresser and what small amount of space was left on the worn Brussels carpet was taken up by a larger leather-topped mahogany desk, a sewing-machine, four mahogany chairs with movable horsehair seats, and an old Brinsmead upright piano of walnut wood with a front of pleated crimson silk and fretwork. Not even the ceiling was empty, for it was surrounded by a heavy cornice of acanthus leaves and in the middle of it above the gaselier a circular efflorescence bloomed in plaster.

It was the good-natured habit of Mrs. Holdship, the railway clerk's widow, to lay one end of the table for supper every night and to leave on the hob a bowl of soup designed, in her own words, "to take the chill off of glass tongue or tin salmon on an empty stomach."

On this June evening the fire in the grate was making the room warmer than was quite pleasant, and Queenie's first action on entering it was to pull back the heavy curtains of faded crimson chenille and open the window wide to admit the stale air of Little Quondam Street. Her next action was to take from the pocket of her coat the turquoise bracelet and clasp it round her wrist, after which she sat down at the end of the table not covered by the white cloth and contemplated the effect by the light of the incandescent gas.

She had been sitting thus for about ten minutes when she heard her father's key in the lock of the front-door. She rose hastily and ran up to her bedroom on the floor above, whence, after taking off her coat and hat and hiding the bracelet in a sachet, she came down to greet her father.

Dicky Danvers was sitting wearily by the fire, on his knees a black bag the glaze of which had been dulled and cracked by long use.

"Another bloody row with Hudson to-night," he said in the toneless voice of utter fatigue.

"What about?"

"The books," he replied. "I was four pounds five and eightpence out. Good god almighty Danvers he said to me what do you think you're playing at this is the second time in three weeks you've been out are your brains dead or have you been trying on some funny business. I said what the hell are you hinting guv'nor and then we started the whole history of what a hero he'd been and what a deadhead I'd been for the last ten years I've kept going the bloody business side of that broken-down Noah's ark of a theatre I said if you take my advice you'll turn this rotten hole into a picture theatre as soon as you can because these outlying halls and theatres will be no bloody use to anybody in a year or two it's too easy to get up to the West End nowadays

that may be good advice Danvers he said but it doesn't help to explain why you're four pounds five and eight out this week and why you were two pounds three and two out a fortnight ago hell I said if you think I'm a damned thief why don't you say so right out."

The weary toneless narrative stopped abruptly, and Dicky Danvers leant back in the armchair, his eyes closed.

The swarthiness of the ex-dancer's complexion had turned with pain and disappointment and uncongenial work to a shadowy muddiness. His once raven-dark hair was now the lifeless grey of old goosedown. His lithe figure had degenerated into a sickly meagreness. Yet in spite of this premature decay the likeness between him and his daughter was striking.

"But what did he say, dad?"

"He told me to take the books home with me and get them straight if I could before to-morrow I was in two minds to fling the night's takings at him and clear out for good but god knows where I'd get another job now if I did and your thirty bob a week at the Orient won't keep us both."

"You didn't—you didn't embezzle the money, did you, dad?" Queenie asked.

Dicky Danvers sat up in his chair with a suddenness that almost recalled one of his famous harlequin leaps of twenty years ago.

"Of course I didn't take the money, you silly little fool," he exclaimed in angry amazement at his daughter's suspicion. "Good God, you'll ask me next if I'm a burglar."

"Sorry, dad. Only I thought you might have been temporarily hard up."

"Did I embezzle the money? Embezzle, if you please," he grumbled to himself.

"Come on, and have some soup," she urged. "I didn't mean to annoy you. After supper we'll have a go at the books together. They're probably quite all right. Only you were tired."

And Queenie was justified in being optimistic. The mistake in accountancy was discovered. Her father was so pleased that he treated himself to the last of the cigars in the box with which one of the patrons of the theatre had presented him last Christmas.

"Dash it, Queenie, I believe you'd make a grand clerk if you ever leave the Orient."

She was thinking that if it was so easy to detect a mistake in books it ought to be just as easy to make a mistake that could not be detected.

"I believe I'll take up shorthand and typewriting," she declared. "There's a lot of talk about changes at the Orient, and one never knows what's going to happen."

"You might do worse," her father agreed. "And if Hudson takes my advice and turns the theatre into a picture palace, which is what he ought to do, he might give you a job. I've a kind of notion I'm going to snuff out pretty quick myself."

"Oh, don't you start in being melancholy, dad. We had enough of that in the dressing-room to-night."

Queenie told him about Jenny Pearl.

"Well, if you ask *me*, she was lucky. I daresay your mother would thank me now if I'd put a bullet into her before she bolted with Voxo, the World's Greatest Ventriloquist. I heard of her only to-night from a fellow who's out of a shop and came in to see our show. He told me Simmons has treated her like dirt since he pushed her out of his act five years ago and brought in the usual fluffy piece of goods that even the world's greatest ventriloquists can't do without. Yes, I daresay she'd thank me now if I'd played the heavy husband

when she walked out on you and me: you a kid of seven, and me likely to be a cripple for the rest of my life."

"I can remember her quite well," said Queenie.

"Can you? Then you can remember one of the rottenest cows who ever walked."

"Well, that's enough of her, dad. You'll spoil that last cigar if you start chewing at it. Would you like a whisky and soda?"

"Yes, by jingo, that's just what I would like."

Queenie could not resist any longer.

"Dad, I had a present to-night," she boasted.

"Did you?"

"Yes, a turquoise bracelet."

"Did you? I didn't know you were in tow with any young chap."

"Oh well, I'm not. It was a raffle-ticket which one of the girls at the club gave me. She had two. And I won this bracelet. I'll show it you, if you like."

"Is it genuine?"

"Oh yes, rather. It must be worth quite ten pounds."

Queenie ran upstairs to fetch the bracelet. The prospect of displaying the fruit of her first theft filled her with exultation and as she ran back with it to the sitting-room she felt she was floating downstairs as one floats in a dream. If it had not been so late by now she would have sat down at the old Brinsmead piano and played a triumphal march.

"Won it in a raffle, eh?" her father commented. "I wonder who it belonged to once."

"What do you mean, dad? I tell you I won it in a raffle. It wouldn't have belonged to anybody."

"Well, look at these initials on the inside of the clasp. B.K. I suppose some poor girl had to sell it, and

they bought it cheap for this raffle. Never mind, it's good and solid, and the turquoises are a clear enough blue. It was worth winning. How much was the ticket?"

"Half a crown."

Queenie replied promptly enough; but nevertheless a panic was over her. She wished she had not yielded to the impulse to show the bracelet to her father. If there was a fuss over that bracelet . . . if that dirty little five to two Bertold kicked up a fuss . . . if the police should make enquiries . . . it was mad to have shown the bracelet to dad . . . that was just the kind of thing the police would do . . . go poking about and making enquiries at the homes of the different girls . . . and dad was so stupid . . . he'd be sure to give the show away. . . .

"I feel a bit worried about taking it, dad. I feel I ought to give it up to the girl who gave me the ticket. In fact, I think I'll do that to-morrow."

Dicky Danvers smiled cynically.

"When you're a bit older, my lass, you won't be quite so generous. You'll find nobody thinks any the more of you in this world for parting with what belongs to you. However, you do what you want."

Queenie went up to her room, resolved to go down early to the theatre and put the bracelet back in Madge Wilson's make-up box before any of the girls arrived; but reflection in the comfort of bed began to persuade her that she was being unnecessarily nervous. Madge Wilson might suppose she had lost the bracelet outside the theatre. Why should she suddenly suspect one of the girls of having stolen it? Any old way Madge could not do much over the Sunday, and it would be time enough to put the bracelet back on Monday if there were signs to-morrow of a serious enquiry. It was ridiculous to plan a career of crime for yourself and then

be frightened of pinching a girl's bracelet. Besides, she might not be at the Orient much longer. There was no future there for enriching oneself at the expense of other people. You couldn't consider yourself Jim the Penman because you had pinched a few pieces of jewellery in a dressing-room. It would be drudgery learning shorthand and typewriting, but it might lead her out of this no-thoroughfare. Dancing as one of a line of girls was just a no-thoroughfare. It might not be such a dead end if she attracted men; but they did not seem to care for her. The kind of men who could be of use to a girl with her ambitions wanted fluffy dolls. A man like Madge Wilson's Bertold, who was probably making all his money at the expense of other people, would never look at a girl like herself. In the city, however, there must be dozens of Bertolds who would never think of going to a place like the Orient to find a girl and who when they heard that their very efficient stenographer had formerly been a ballet-girl would be duly thrilled and start making love to her just because she had been on the stage and because they would have the idea that all stage girls were easy. Yes, there must be dozens of men in the city over whom she could cast a spell, and once discover the bold plotter of huge and questionable financial coups, what a treasure she could be to such a man! And if he should refuse to regard her as a treasure she would frighten him with the threat of exposure. The scene began to compose itself in the bedroom tucked away under the slates of that small faded house in Little Quondam Street. Her victim resembled Gladys West's Baron. He was a plump little man, with a carefully tended imperial which he was in the habit of stroking and tugging; but as with a deadly chill in her voice she recounted to him the long tale of his swindling operations he would cease to stroke and tug that imperial and collapse like a pricked balloon in his office chair.

"What do you intend to do, Miss Danvers?" he would ask in a quavering voice.

"I intend to be your partner in future," she would announce, lighting a cigarette with the most exquisite sang-froid.

And how surprised dad would be when she came home that evening from the city and announced that he could give Hudson notice as soon as he liked.

"Oh, and by the way, dad, I bought you a car to-day. I think you walk too much. And I think it would be a good plan if you took a little place down on the South Coast. I can go to a couple of thou. for it, and let you have enough to run it comfortably."

Dear old dad, wouldn't he stare!

"But look here, my lass," he would protest. "Where's this money coming from? You're not allowing some rich blackguard to take advantage of you?"

"Oh no, dad. It's me who's taking the advantage. If you follow my advice, you'll persuade Mrs. Holdship to keep house for you. She's always been very decent to us, and I think it would do her good to get away from this poky street."

It was a pity Madge Wilson's Bertold had had his initials engraved on that bracelet, but she certainly need not do anything about returning it yet. And if the disappearance of the bracelet passed off successfully she might pinch that pearl and ruby brooch Gladys West's Baron gave her. Or did he? Gladys West's mother would be quite capable of giving it to her to wear just for her to pretend it was a present from her devoted Baron. He might be a Baron, or he might not, but he did not spend much on Gladys West. All she ever seemed to get out of him was a twopenny blue bus ticket as far as Kensington High Street. He wouldn't even spend another penny on a pink one to go as far as the

corner of the road in which she lived. At least that's what Margery Seymour had told them in the dressing-room, and she often rode back with Gladys and the Baron on her way home. Still, whether the Baron gave it to Gladys or not, it was a neat enough little brooch. And it was only pearls by themselves which brought tears.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GLADYS WEST

BARON ERIK DE ROSEN, with whose outward appearance Queenie Danvers was to make so free in her bedtime fantasty, had come to London as an attaché at one of the Scandinavian legations, but soon afterwards he had forsaken diplomacy in order to join a firm of shipping agents concerned with the Baltic trade. He had first met Gladys West not as an admirer on the other side of the footlights, but as a lodger in her mother's house in Henton Place, one of those secluded rows of solid but modest houses which marked the first notable expansion of the old Court suburb of Kensington in the early years of the reign of Queen Victoria.

What the exact relationship was between Gladys West and her Baron nobody knew except Gladys herself and her mother. She always contrived to suggest to the other girls at the theatre that it was an engagement, but she never committed herself to a positive statement about the position. If one of the girls in the course of a dressing-room squabble threw out nasty remarks about the length of time that some people's engagements lasted, Gladys would look so utterly remote from any possibility of such a nasty remark being aimed at her that the thrower out of such remarks was reduced to a tame silence, after which Gladys would be so excessively sweet to her that in the end the other usually began to believe that perhaps after all Gladys was not vulnerable to a cat's claws. In any case, Gladys West's Baron after over six years of meeting Gladys every night at the end of the court had become such a permanent feature of the Orient stage-door that

speculation on what he was to Gladys and what Gladys was to him was seldom heard nowadays.

Every night as she came out of the theatre Gladys would ask one of the girls if the Baron was waiting for her, and in the whole of the last six years there had been only a single night on which he had not been waiting. It caused quite a sensation behind the scenes. "Did you hear Gladys West's Baron wasn't waiting for her last night?" "Go on!" "It's the truth. She went out as usual and he wasn't there." "What did she do?" "She went back to the stage-door and waited a quarter of an hour, but he wasn't there and she was so upset she went home in a four-wheeler." "And why wasn't he there?" "He came over faint in his club, and fancy, what a funny coincidence, he went home in a four-wheeler too. He'd been back just five minutes when Gladys got home." One girl observed that when he found he had to pay for two four-wheelers he must have come over more faint than ever. Whereupon another girl declared she had had it on the best authority that Gladys paid for her own four-wheeler, because she knew the Baron would be so upset if he had to.

On this June night about a year before the war Gladys asked as usual in the entrance of the stage-door if the Baron was waiting for her, and Lucy Arnold, who had walked down with her from the dressing-room, promised her that he and Nelson's column were still standing.

"You are a rude thing, Lucy Arnold," said Gladys primly, as she passed out into the court.

The rotund little man tugged at his imperial and raised his hat. Gladys fluttered her eyes. The Baron offered his arm. Gladys, as she accepted it, waved with her disengaged arm a good-night to the other girls in sight. Then sedately the pair of them walked along up Regent Street to catch a red Hammersmith omnibus at

the corner of Piccadilly. Thus for perhaps the two thousandth time did Gladys West and her Baron leave the precincts of the Orient Palace of Varieties after the show was over. Day in day out, the procedure never varied except that on cold or wet nights they travelled to Kensington High Street inside the omnibus whereas on evenings like this they rode on top.

The death of Jenny Pearl and the most positive information yet received about the threatened disbandment of the ballet provided Gladys with plenty to talk about. Not that she ever lacked topics of conversation. The Baron in the course of six years had learned the life history of every girl at the Orient and apparently he much enjoyed the small talk of the dressing-room with which Gladys regaled him every night during the jogging bus-ride back to Kensington. Occasionally Gladys would feel that such small talk was lowering her dignity in his estimation, and then she would chatter about some book she had been reading, for she was a great reader of what one of the young men assistants at a Kensington circulating-library called the "better type of novel," its merit in the eyes of Gladys being that it was bound in a stiff cover and therefore clearly a more intellectual product than a story bound in paper. "These awful novelettes that some of the girls simply love," she used to say, fluttering her clear bright eyes in a spasm of critical disapproval which she hoped was becoming.

What the Baron thought of his young friend's taste in literature never transpired, for his only comment was to pat and stroke his imperial and murmur:

"So, so, so."

He himself never read books written in English, which might have suggested to a cynic that he wished to avoid any possible expression of Gladys's opinion about his own reading.

To-night, with the absorbing topics that rose far

above the average scandal of the dressing-room, there was no need for Gladys to fall back on yesterday's novel.

"You know, it's made me feel terribly shaky, Baron, this news about poor Jenny. I can't get out of my head the picture of her running down the court for the last time with her make-up box under her arm and looking back and shouting, 'See you soon. Good-bye, all.'"

"She has said good-bye to me that evening," the Baron reminded Gladys. "We have shaken hands together, and I wished her much happiness."

"Yes, I remember. She stopped you for a moment, didn't she, and shook hands with you. Poor kid! Well, I know it isn't usual to put on mourning except for a relation, but I'll be very tempted to put on my black tailor-made to-morrow."

"It suits you very well, Gladys. Black is always good for women."

"Well, if my mother doesn't mind I think I will put it on to-morrow. My mother's very particular about anything like that. She's very old-fashioned, and she might think it funny putting on black for a friend I haven't seen for more than three years."

Gladys was dependent upon her mother's judgment in everything except her novel reading. If the smallest doubt ever entered her mind about her relationship with the Baron it was immediately expelled by the reflection that her mother approved of him entirely. The relationship itself was never discussed between them. The moral standard for everything was the Baron's breeding, prudence, discretion, financial stability, and consideration for Mrs. West, a consideration which was beautifully embroidered by his courteous manner in addressing her.

"Well, they may sneer at foreigners if they like; but this I will say, Gladys, that of all the gentlemen I have looked after since your father had his misfortune the Baron is the biggest gentleman of the lot."

The misfortune which had overtaken Mrs. West's husband was an illness which had rendered him incapable of looking after his business, a butcher's shop in King Street, Hammersmith. Mrs. West had been delighted by the turn of events, although she had managed to conceal her delight under an appearance of wifely devotion. The sale of the business had brought in enough money to buy the lease of the house in Henton Place, and equip it with excellent apartments for single gentlemen, and Mr. West, whose habit of shouting his wares in King Street on a Saturday night had exacerbated his wife's sense of gentility, was now permanently mute. He had been a jovial roistering man, and did not long survive the melancholy fate of the incurable invalid. It might be unfair to say that to his wife's delight he died within a year of his illness, but it was certainly much to her relief, a relief of which she hid the outward signs under an exceptionally thick widow's veil.

Gladys had been a small child when her father died and could remember but vaguely the silent presence in what Mrs. West often said without a trace of bitterness in her tone was really the best room in the house. Indeed, it was the room which Baron Erik de Rosen was one day to take for so many years of spotless tenancy. The reason why Gladys was now a member of the Orient corps de ballet on a salary of twenty-five shillings a week was not due to her having had the slightest ambition for a stage-career or more than the most ordinary talent for dancing, but to the fact that her mother's sister was an ex-ballerina and conducted a small dancing-school, to which Gladys was sent as a sign of sisterly affection and from which she had entered the Orient seven years ago at the age of eighteen. Her aunt died soon after she joined the ballet, and her school, which had never been famous, was already completely forgotten. To sisterly affection may be added as another reason for making a

dancer out of Gladys the thwarted terpsichorean ambitions of her own mother. She had wanted to become a dancer herself, but she had damaged a leg in youth, and so had remained at home until in desperation she had married, when she was a year or two over thirty, William West, the King Street butcher. Mrs. West was now approaching sixty. She was thirty-four when her only child was born. She was a small woman with fine features turning to sharpness, and although she walked with a slight limp she always conveyed an impression of neatness and precision in her movements and even of considerable agility. Gladys was much like her mother in build and features, but she had inherited her father's complexion and bright eyes and no doubt from his side her sunny light brown hair. Both Mrs. West and her daughter suggested birds, particularly Mrs. West, whose limp had something of a hop in it and whose eyes had the hardness and sometimes the mocking glitter of a bird's. The very house in Hornton Place called to mind a scrupulously kept brass birdcage, and the trees in the park and gardens of Holland House, which brought the country within sight of these trim Kensington streets, seemed to provide a natural background for Gladys and her mother.

Yet in spite of their superficial air of small country town gentility both mother and daughter were representative Cockneys. Gladys might flutter her eyes and talk soulfully about the novels she was reading. Mrs. West might sit back and admire with the utmost maternal complacency the ladylike behaviour of her daughter. Let the slightest excitement affect them, and the vapours were cleared from their minds and voices. If on such occasions they often became as shrill as cockatoos, such shrillness would not have been an entirely unwelcome relief to some people, in that small respectable Kensingtonian world. Not to Baron Erik de Rosen,

however. He disliked the shrillness extremely, and at the first sign of it he usually retired to his sitting-room and read some book in any language but English. Apart from the positively unpleasant impact upon his aural nerves of shrill Cockney he did not care to feel that even temporarily the whole of existence was not revolving round himself. If any physiognomical generalization be permissible it is that all men with round faces are self-centred, and the rotundity of the Baron's face was exceptionally regular. Some round-faced men work off a lot of their self-indulgence in the mere greed of carnality, and in making pets of their stomachs flatter their own egoism sufficiently. The Baron was greedy enough, but to whatever extent he might indulge his stomach he demanded an equal indulgence for all his functions, bodily and mental. He did not recognize the right of any life outside his own. Mrs. West kept her trim house in Hornton Place expressly to gratify his comfort. He assumed that the mind and body of Gladys was equally designed for his service. To be excluded for an instant from the focus of attention in Hornton Place made him sulky, and if his sulkiness did not evoke an immediate penitence he withdrew.

In such a mood of disgruntled egocentricity he withdrew this evening to his own room. He had often before heard Gladys and Mrs. West shrilling, now one against the other, now in unison; but he could not recall a previous display of excited emotion to match the effect of the communication by Gladys to her mother of the news of Jenny Pearl's violent death.

"Oh, Gladys, what a shockink thing!" In such moments many of Mrs. West's "ings" turned into "inks." "Well, I don't know when I heard anythink like that before. Are you going off, Baron? I've put everything for you in your room. Good-night, and I hope you'll sleep well."

The Baron wished a cold good-night to the two women who each in her own way contributed such a large share to his well-being, and took himself off.

"The Baron seems a bit put out, Gladys. You didn't have any little unpleasantness on the way back from the theatre, did you?"

Gladys was stung into an unwonted cynicism by the Baron's manner.

"No, but he doesn't want anybody to talk about anything except himself. It's because I told you about Jenny. I'd told *him* coming back on the bus and he was very interested, but that's because I was telling *him*. He's not at all interested when I tell you."

"Now, Gladys, you mustn't be too hard on the poor Baron. You know how very fond he is of you."

"I wonder if he is."

"Most certainly he is, Gladys. You don't suppose I would give you so much liberty to go about with him as you do unless I was sure he was very fond of you. But what a shockink thing about Jenny Pearl! Murdered! Fancy that, and here is us sitting here in Hornton Place and her in her coffin. Or no I suppose if she was only shot this mornink she wouldn't be in her coffin yet. They'll be having the Po SMORTUM. Ugh! Fancy gettink yourself cut up by a lot of doctors and a jury of common farm labourers and whatnot standing round gaping. Ugh! It gives you the creeps, don't it? And in fact I call it disgusting."

Gladys began to cry.

"That's right, dearie, I know what you're feelink about your poor little friend, because though she was sometimes a great deal vulgarer than what I've been accustomed to she had a very good side to her character, and which I was never blind to. I wouldn't cry too much if I was you, Gladys. You've got a thin nose like me—an aristocratic nose I've often heard it called—but noses

like that show very red. In fact yours has gone very red at the tip already."

"Oh, well, what of it?" Gladys exclaimed petulantly. "If my nose is like a slice of beetroot to-morrow I don't care. I can't help thinking of the jolly times Jenny and me had. It was always jolly when you went anywhere with Jenny Pearl. She made it jolly, because she was such a lad. I couldn't call her my greatest friend, because she only had one great friend, and that was Ireen Dale. But I think she liked Rita Vitali and Maudie Chapman and me, and she used to like Madge Wilson once. Only Madge talked rather nasty about her behind her back and she had to tell her off."

"Do you suppose she was going off with this Maurice of hers when this fellow she married caught her?"

"I shouldn't think so. It wouldn't be like Jenny to let any fellow come back into her life when *he* liked, not when once he'd taken himself off out of it when *he* wanted to. I reckon her husband made a big mistake, I do."

Mrs. West sighed.

"Well, I don't like to say a word against your father, Gladys, but if any woman knows what it is to be married to a man who doesn't understand her, well, I know it. Your poor father paid for it in the end when he was took with that illness, and I forgave him years ago, but there it is. I know what a man's capable of, and perhaps it's all for the best that the poor girl is gone. Now, for goodness sake, child, do stop crying. The Baron will hear you, and I'm sure he doesn't like for a girl to cry *too* much. He's such a quiet man himself."

"I don't care if the Baron does hear me," Gladys sobbed.

"Here, take a sniff of my salts, Gladys. You'll be losing all control of yourself in another minute, and you've got to remember there are other lodgers in the

house beside the Baron. Look at the time. Nearly one o'clock. If you don't take your supper soon, you won't be in bed before it starts getting light."

Gladys shook her head so violently that she shook a comb out, and a strand of light brown hair came down to add a final touch to her grief-stricken appearance.

"I don't want any supper," she sobbed. "I don't want to do anything—I mean nothing except think about poor Jenny and the times that are gone by for ever."

"Well, that's just spoiling yourself, Gladys. That's what that is. The last girl I know of who would want to see you making such an exhibition of yourself is Jenny Pearl. Very cool and collected *she* always was. In fact if she'd had the nice surroundings you've been blessed with, Gladys, she'd have been very near as lady-like as what you are. And what's the good of saying you don't want no supper? You'll only lay awake for the rest of the night and look all washed out to-morrow. Come along now, pull yourself together, Gladys. If you don't feel like eatink all I've laid for you you can drink a nice cup of cocoa."

It was easier to swallow the cocoa than to argue with her mother. So Gladys drank it, and then went off to bed.

Her room was behind the sitting-room on the ground floor. Her mother slept in the basement next to the kitchen. The Baron had the two rooms on the first floor. It was, at any rate in the eyes of Gladys and her mother, a pretty bedroom with gay curtains of chintz and a suite of Maple's fussiest furniture of the 1895 style. These were a chest of drawers of some shiny light wood that was designed to hold balloon-sleeve blouses, a wardrobe which had a shelf with plenty of space for immense flowery hats, and a dressing-table whose mirror was intended to reflect the process of lacing in long stays. The brass bedstead was a good deal larger

than so slim a girl as Gladys required, but her mother, whose bridal couch it had been, thought it was too large for her own room in the basement and had taken for herself the smaller bed soon after the Baron came to lodge in Hornton Place.

The windows of Gladys's room looked on a rectangle of garden larger than is usually found even in Kensington, and seeming larger still on account of the verdure of Holland Park beyond. She pulled back the curtains without lighting the gas and, flinging up the window, she leaned out over the sill. In the perfume of the June night fresh greenery contended with the acrid odour of soot, combining to produce what is perhaps the most essentially London smell there is. Eastward was the lurid stain upon the sky, but westward from the groves of Holland House was diffused a deep country air, and Gladys fancied that it must be over there, miles and miles away, that the dead body of Jenny lay. A slight knowledge of geography would have confirmed her fancy.

Perhaps it was silly to take on so because a girl you hadn't seen for over three years was dead—a girl whose life had gone in quite another direction to your own. Still, it wasn't just working yourself up to make yourself feel important. She did mourn for Jenny. Jenny had always seemed too sure of herself. Even when her Maurice had left her all of a sudden like that she had never lost her pride. It must have been maddening to think of the way all the other girls would be pitying her, but nevertheless she had never broken down. Some said she was hard and did not feel things like other girls. That was rot. No girl at the Orient felt things more deeply than Jenny. Ah, those old days. There had been that birthday-party of Jenny's in her Maurice's studio in Grosvenor Road. What was the number? 422. Yes, 422. Funny how you could remember a number like that. What a gorgeous afternoon that had

been! And it was only one of so many. There was no use in pretending that there was as much fun at the Orient nowadays as what there used to be. Perhaps it was because the girls were getting older and the newer girls didn't have the life of Jenny Pearl. Yet Lucy Arnold had plenty of life. What would happen to her? What would happen to all of them, if it came to that?

"What will happen to me?"

She asked the question aloud, and her voice sounded terribly clear in this silence of houses and trees, in this seeming remoteness from London, in this strange loneliness which had come upon her since the news of Jenny's death. It used to be Jenny who never scrupled to ask her right out what was the state of affairs between herself and the Baron. She used to pretend to be unable to understand what Jenny could possibly mean. "That's right, Gladys, now wave your eyes about and look innocent." The voice of Jenny came back from the past as distinctly as if she herself had come back from the dead. And sometimes she used to pretend to be annoyed and suggest that Jenny had a cheek to ask such a question. Yet she had always enjoyed being asked it. She had always wanted to muster up the courage to assure Jenny that the Baron and herself were having the most marvellous love-affair. Yet she had known Jenny would never believe it, and that being so it had been necessary to keep the true state of affairs as much a secret from her as it was kept from everybody.

When the Baron had first paid attention to her she had fallen in love with him. Not wildly. Still, she had been in love with him. And she had expected that when she let him come to her room that first time she would fall madly in love with him afterwards. Instead of which she had wanted to giggle. Even now she always wanted to giggle, although it had become just nothing. Why hadn't her mother tried to interfere?

Would *she* if she had a daughter practically encourage her to do what her own mother had done? Yet perhaps it was the easiest way to pass through youth. The girls who had married always seemed worried by their responsibilities. Whereas she had no responsibility, and the Baron was much too fond of his own peace of mind ever to run the slightest risk of getting her into trouble. Six years now since she had met him. And how long was it to go on? He never looked at another girl. He never failed to meet her after the show. On the other hand, he had never once taken her out to supper, and not even on those awful nights last winter when she had had that very bad cold had he suggested driving her home in a cab. He had hardly ever given her a present, and those he had given had not been worth showing to anybody—except the pearl and ruby brooch, and that the Baron had found one day while he was walking in Kensington Gardens. He had handed it over to one of the keepers; but nobody had claimed it, and when it was handed back to the Baron he had given it to her. In spite of his meanness she was fond of him, or perhaps it was that she was used to him. If to-morrow he were to announce that he was leaving England and returning to his own country, would she pine to accompany him? No, she certainly would not want to go abroad with him for good. But would she miss him when she stayed at home? Well, of course she was bound to miss him. You must miss a man with whom you had ridden home on a bus from the theatre every night for six years. You would miss him in the same way as you would miss a dog. But it wouldn't really be more than that. What did she know about the Baron? Nothing except that he dined every night at his club and played cards there sometimes, and sometimes just read the papers until it was time to walk along to the Orient and meet her. Nothing except that at ten o'clock every

morning he went to the city. Nothing except that sometimes he would come down to her room in a dressing-gown which still always made her want to giggle and that his hair smelt of some lemon-scented stuff and that when it was ruffled he looked like a funny turn. And what did he know of her? Nothing except that she danced in the ballets every night and gossiped with the girls in the interval. Nothing except that sometimes she would be all day long in the theatre rehearsing and that she had often hinted how nice it would be if he would come down to the theatre some afternoon and take her out to tea. Nothing except that when he was coming to her room she always wore her prettiest nightdress with pink ribbons because once he had come without letting her know and she had been wearing a nightdress without any ribbons at all and he had seemed to criticize her appearance. Nothing except the shape of her body.

Well, anyway he wasn't coming to her room to-night. He would be too much afraid that she would start crying again about Jenny Pearl. "I think your Baron's very dull, Gladys. I don't know how you put up with him." "He's awfully nice. He is really, Jenny. You don't know him like I do." "Nice, is he? So's next year, perhaps. But I don't know that either. And that beard. What? Oh, I think it's terrible. Why doesn't he cut it off and give you a fur coat instead?" Did Jenny know what she was thinking about her now? Some people said dead people knew everything.

"Oh well, Jenny," she murmured aloud. "If you do then you know I wish you weren't dead and that it was four years ago again and that you were making me laugh in the dressing-room."

Gladys turned away from the window, and was very soon in bed. She looked at the two novels on the table beside it. No, to-night she would not read about people

who never existed. She would lie awake for a while and think about Jenny. But she did not lie awake long, and she dreamed that she was running up and down the stairs at the Orient and looking in every dressing-room for Jenny Pearl because George at the stage-door had told her that she had come back; and that then somewhere in a far, far away corner at the end of a long passage she had found a room full of old dresses and there was an enormous wardrobe at one end of it and she heard Jenny's voice calling: "I'm here, I'm here. Let me out, Gladys. Let me out. Let me out!" But when she unlocked the door it was Lucy Arnold, not Jenny Pearl. And waking up Gladys found her pillow was soaked with tears.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LUCY ARNOLD

WHEN the girls in Room 45 said Lucy Arnold reminded them of Jenny Pearl, the explanation was to be found in the general effect of her personality rather than in any very close outward likeness. Jenny's face had been small. So was Lucy's; but Lucy's face was heart-shaped, and Jenny's had been more oval. Lucy's eyes were as gay as Jenny's, but they had no trace of a slant and instead of being a deep blue strangely flecked with dark grey and dark green they were a sparkling limpid hazel. Their hair was similar, but both had played about with peroxide and camomile like so many other girls that it was absurd to talk about similarity where hair was concerned. There was, however, in Lucy Arnold's way of speaking and moving, and in her attitude toward the other girls a definite reminder of Jenny Pearl, which was all the more striking because Lucy Arnold had never met her and there could be no question of imitation. There was, too, the same crystalline hardness and clarity which shocked the other girls, vessels of potter's clay most of them, still soft enough for further moulding but apt to crack in the process of being baked. Lucy Arnold, as Jenny would have been before her, was incapable of indulging herself in what she would have regarded as a falsely sentimental display of emotion over the death of a predecessor. She could not help feeling a little awed by the violence and abruptness of her end, but she would not allow herself to reveal a sign of that awe, knowing that if she did the other girls would be quick to drag her down into the

turbid stream of their own emotion, and Lucy was determined the more completely she sacrificed her own individuality to the perfection of the first line of boys as a whole the more firmly she would resist incorporation within it off the stage. Let the rest consider her too selfish to be touched by the tragedy of Jenny Pearl's end. She preferred that to communal lamentation.

Yet, though not in the way of tears, she was probably as deeply moved as any of her companions except Irene Dale. At any rate, she made the excuse of a meeting with some fellow to detach herself from the various girls of other dressing-rooms who wanted to hear in detail what each member of Room 45 had to say about Jenny Pearl's death, to which was added an extreme curiosity to hear anything that could be gathered from hints Madge Wilson might have scattered about the future of the Orient. Lucy had in fact promised to meet three different young men this evening, one outside the Piccadilly Tube, another under the arcade by the Quadrant at the corner of Glasshouse Street, and a third by Swan and Edgar's plate-glass windows. It would do them good to wait, she thought: to-night she would walk straight home as quickly as possible. With this resolve, she made her way into the Haymarket and along the north side of Trafalgar Square to cross the Strand at Agar Street. She had not walked many yards eastward when she turned suddenly through an archway opening directly off the pavement and entered a narrow alley of old houses and small shops at the end of which a flight of stone steps led down into the Adelphi. At a door beside a shop closed with old-fashioned shutters and bearing the name *Samuel Arnold* she stopped and slipped her key into the lock. A moment later she had passed within to a narrow panelled hallway in which a small jet of gas was burning blue from a bracket. Lucy paused for an instant at the foot of the steep stairs to listen, in that

immemorial odour of greengrocery and fruit which filled the rest of the house from the shop. With a quick little chuckle of triumph, she turned away from the stairs and walked along to a door at the end of the passage, which she flung open. The kitchen thus abruptly revealed was snug and homely, and through the open window the traffic of the Strand was muted down to a murmur by tall interposed buildings. On one side of the range in a wheelback armchair sat a buxom woman of forty-five, her complexion still fresh as the flowers her husband sold, her eyes of the same shade of clear sparkling hazel as her daughter's. On the other side of the range, in a deep armchair covered with well-worn leather which, in spite of the fact that its springs were as prominent as the ribs of a starving creature, was almost luxuriously comfortable, lolled a smallish man with neat features, twinkling eyes, and a closely clipped fair moustache grizzled at either end. He was in his shirt sleeves and was wearing a pair of black velvet slippers on the toes of which were embroidered two large marguerite-daisies.

"Good gracious, she's come home before twelve!" exclaimed Mrs. Arnold.

"Tell us if you've heard the world's running down to-night," said Mr. Arnold. "Because if it is I won't bother to undress myself."

"Can't anyone come back from the theatre before twelve without your orbs lighting up like two pairs of gas globes?" Lucy demanded. "And haven't I just caught both of you out nicely by coming back before twelve! What? Who's always in bed by half-past ten to the tick?" This to her mother. "And who has to go to bed at nine because he has to get up at five to go and buy his stuff at Covent Garden?" This to her father.

"Ah well, Lou, your mother and me was having a bit of a chat, and what with one thing and another,

there you are! It isn't often we sit up as late as this, is it, Maggie?"

"No more often than her ladyship arrives home before midnight," observed Mrs. Arnold.

Lucy shook her head in mock disgust.

"What a loving reception," she declared.

"Come on, Lucy, you sit down here and keep your mother up a bit longer, I'm off upstairs. Here, mind my cherry-ripe!"

Sam Arnold hurriedly rescued a corncob pipe from being sat on by his daughter and betook himself to bed.

"There isn't anything the matter, is there, Lucy?" Mrs. Arnold asked quickly.

"Of course not, why should there be?"

"I don't know. But you seem kind of thoughtful."

Lucy told her mother about Jenny Pearl.

"Well, I won't say 'look out or the same thing 'll happen to you,' because that would be one sure way of edging you on to career around worse than what you do already. Still . . . look here, Lucy, who's this fellow who came round to the shop this afternoon and after buying a bunch of grapes asked your father if he had a daughter in the Orient ballet?"

"What a liberty! I don't know who he is!"

"Well, he was a nice-looking, nice-spoken young fellow I'll admit, but I'm bound to say I was a bit annoyed with your father when he asked him to come in and have a cup of tea."

"Asked him in to have a cup of tea? In here, do you mean?"

"Well, isn't that just like your father? If *he* takes a fancy to anyone, the next thing is he's giving him the key of the door."

"But did this fellow say he knew me?"

"No, he didn't actually say he knew you, but he

talked a lot about the Orient, and I thought he might be some chap you'd been playing up."

Lucy, remembering the three young men possibly still waiting for her round Piccadilly Circus, could not scoff at her mother's fancy.

"Well, of course, it *might* be," she admitted. "Did he give you his name?"

Mrs. Arnold got up and opened a tea-canister on the mantelpiece.

"Here's a card he left."

She gave it to her daughter, and watched her keenly while she read out "Mr. Terence Manning, Clare College, Cambridge."

Indignation flashed from Lucy's eyes.

"Well, I like that! Why, he's a schoolboy! What a cheek for a kid at school to go printing cards and calling himself Mr. Terence Manning and to come chasing after me. You ought to have given him a jolly good spanking."

"He was young certainly, but he wasn't young enough to be at school," Mrs. Arnold insisted. "I wouldn't put him a day under twenty-one or twenty-two."

"Well, *I* don't know him, and if he calls again you can tell him to p.o. as quick as he likes."

"You *are* getting to talk common in that theatre," Mrs. Arnold said disapprovingly. "As if I'd tell him any such thing."

"All right, Lady Arnold, if you don't like my French tell him I won't play in his back-garden and that I don't love him any more. Mr. Terence Manning, indeed. What a liberty!"

Lucy shared a bedroom at the top of the house with her younger sister Margaret, who was working at a commercial college, and having to be in Southampton Row before Lucy was awake, had been long in bed. Her

older sister Vera had been married last year to a Covent Garden salesman and was now living in furnished rooms in Long Acre. Her only brother Will, aged sixteen, helped his father in the shop, and Sam Arnold used to say he wished brains grew as fast as broccoli so that Will would hurry up and grow enough to help him with the buying at Covent Garden and give him an occasional chance to lie in bed after five o'clock.

Lucy was extremely wide awake when she got up to her room, and she felt a sudden pang of regret for having come home so early on this warm summer's night. That fellow who was waiting for her by Swan and Edgar's had talked about a party which some friends of his were giving in Camberwell. He had wanted Lucy to come and bring with her another girl. It was to be a merry night, and the escort had pledged his word to drive Lucy and her friend home in a taxi when the fun slackened down, probably round about three o'clock. Yes, she ought not to have come home in this soppy way. She ought not to have wasted the evening. She opened the window and leaned out on the sill, listening to the faint murmur of life beyond the tall buildings which hid this forgotten old corner of London from the changing Strand. That murmur of life made her feel more sorry than ever that she had come back and deliberately imprisoned herself like this. She even contemplated going out again on the chance of finding that fellow still waiting for her in Piccadilly. But perhaps he would not still be there and that would make her feel foolish, which would be worse than feeling that a night was being wasted.

Most of the sills in Goldbeater Alley had window-boxes on them, and leaning out like this Lucy could smell that once familiar London smell of lately watered window-boxes. It wasn't such a bad place to live, she thought, within a few minutes' walk of most of the places

you wanted to go to, and it was nicer to live in a street where you knew all the neighbours because there were so few of them and they were so close together. Indeed, you could almost look into the rooms opposite. She wouldn't exchange Goldbeater Alley for anywhere else in London. It was like a street in a harlequinade. There was a butcher's shop, and a grocer's, and dad's shop, and a stationer's, and a dressmaker's (only the old crow made terrible clothes), and almost the smallest pub in London—The Fox in the Hole—where you got jolly good London stout on draught, if you didn't mind it rather sweet, and a fishmonger's, and a dairy, and an old bookshop. What fun it had been when they were kids! No street belonged so much to kids as Goldbeater Alley had belonged to them . . . funny thing about that fellow calling and asking dad if he had a daughter at the Orient and then coming in and leaving his card . . . Terence Manning . . . oh, it must just have been a chance question for something to say, and dad had wanted to show off. Anybody only had to say something to him about his daughter being on the stage, and he'd throw in half as many gooseberries again as they'd paid for.

In spite of going to bed at such an unnatural hour Lucy managed to fall asleep just as easily as when she turned over on her pillow at the natural hours of three or four in the morning. And when she woke at the unnatural hour of eight to watch the motes in the old room glinting in a shaft of sunlight and to hear the blackbird singing in the wicker-cage that hung outside the window of the next house, and to watch her young sister Margaret, unaware she was awake, standing without a stitch on her in front of the glass and trying the firmness and smoothness and shapeliness of her young breasts, Lucy decided it was a mistake not to go to bed early more often merely for the pleasure of waking up at this

unnatural hour instead of staying fast asleep until the natural hour of eleven when the sun had left her bedroom window and the blackbird was silent in his wicker-cage and her young sister Margaret was working at her shorthand in Southampton Row.

“Oo-er!” Margaret ejaculated, swinging round in a sudden awareness that her sister was watching her. “Fancy you being awake as early as this! What a surprise!”

“Go on, you female Sandow, hurry up with massaging your massive limbs, and bring me up a cup of tea before you start off to school.”

“What a liberty!”

“That’s all right, duckie. I’m waking early every morning this summer.”

“Yes, I daresay. Before you’ve gone to sleep, I reckon,” Margaret retorted.

The mysterious call of Mr. Terence Manning of Clare College, Cambridge, was forgotten in the excitement caused in the dressing-room by the disappearance of Madge Wilson’s turquoise bracelet.

“Oh, girls, what I went through this morning! My Bertold was so annoyed with me last night when he noticed it wasn’t on my wrist, that I got up this morning at half-past seven, at half-past seven, girls, and went all the way down to the theatre, and then I couldn’t find it. I could *not* find it, and I went out to telephone to Bertold, and it was one of those unnatural telephone boxes where the floor wobbles as you go in. Talk about Dover to Ostend! Because I’d had nothing only a cup of tea before I started out. And then Bertold went on so that they said another twopence please. And could I find more than a penny? I could not. And then the girl at the other end kept saying, ‘I’ll have to cut you off,’ and so I said, ‘Well, cut me off, you silly little fool.’ And she did. And when I got back home there came a

telegram from Bertold telling me to meet him at the Monico for lunch and off I had to start again. And what a temper he was in! 'Well,' I said, 'I can't help it,' I said, 'if the bracelet disappears. I didn't lose it on purpose, Bertold.'"

On top of the fuss about Madge Wilson's bracelet came the news that Maudie Chapman would not be at the theatre until Monday at any rate, on account of her little daughter's scarlet fever.

And on the Monday came the news that Ivy was dead.

The girls in the dressing-room subscribed lavishly for a big wreath of arums, but none of them went to the funeral because Maudie sent a message begging them not to come.

"I reckon she's too much upset," said Lucy. "I reckon you only want people at a funeral when you're sorry, yes, but not so sorry that you can't enjoy a jolly good cry in the centre of the stage. I reckon poor Maudie's past crying. Her Ivy was everything to her."

Maudie came back to the theatre a week later, dry-eyed, but looking so completely shattered that her companions tried to restore her to herself by pressing upon her quaterns of gin. They agreed among themselves that she ought to cry, and that there was nothing like gin for fetching the tears. Maudie drank the gin, but never a tear came to her haggard eyes.

The next thing that happened was the disappearance of Gladys West's pearl and ruby brooch, which she was ready to swear she had when she took her things off and started to dress for the opening ballet. She remembered distinctly unpinning it and putting it in her make-up box the same as Madge Wilson had done with her turquoise bracelet. She hadn't given it a thought till she was dressing at the end of the show, and then it wasn't there.

The girls looked at one another uncomfortably. Could there be a thief in the dressing-room?

"If I had a better opinion of the police," Mrs. Pilkington declared, "I'd call in the police right away on my own account, because I'm bound to be the first suspected, me being in and out and about the whole evening. Well, I'll say right now that I'd sooner rob a duchess of her tarara, I'd sooner rob Queen Mary of her crown, God bless her, than what I'd rob a poor girl of one of her bits and pieces, and that's speaking from my heart, that is."

The girls assured Mrs. Pilkington that the last person they suspected or ever would suspect was herself.

"That's as maybe," she replied with much stateliness, "but facks are facks, and if I come up before the magistrate on a charge of stealing, what's he going to say to me, girls? He's going to say to me 'Chance is a fine thing, my good woman, and who had a better chance than what you did to take these here bits and pieces of joolyery?' Yes, I'd ask George to go and whistle for a policeman right away, but what would be the result? You'd only lose the rest of your joolyery and the whole blessed lot of us would find ourselves in the Black Maria."

The loss of the jewellery was bad enough; but presently small sums of money started to vanish, and at last the management hearing about it took the investigation in hand, with the result that by the ancient ruse of marked money the thefts were brought home to Queenie Danvers. There was no prosecution after she offered to restore to their owners the turquoise bracelet and the pearl and ruby brooch, but of course she had to leave the Orient, and it was Lucy who heard of her next as a pupil at her sister's commercial college in Southampton Row.

"We've got a girl from your theatre now as a student," Margaret announced.

"Don't be silly," said Lucy. "You don't suppose any girl would be so soppy as to leave the Orient and start banging a typewriter?"

"It's true, Lucy. Danvers her name is."

It was on the tip of Lucy's tongue to tell her younger sister why the Southampton College of Commerce, Southampton Row, had lured Queenie Danvers away from the Orient; but she refrained. After all, it might do in her chances of getting anywhere.

"Oh, Queenie Danvers? That's nothing to tear oilcloth over. She likes trying everything, she does. But don't you invite her here, Margarine, because she and I had a bit of a row once."

"I don't want to start inviting out your flash friends," said Margaret indignantly. "I've got friends of my own. And don't call me Margarine."

"No, darling. Yes, darling. That's right, darling. You ask all your little friends to tea next Saturday afternoon, and play spelling games with them."

Margaret tossed her head.

The place of Queenie Danvers in the first line of boys was taken by Belle Harris, and Madge Wilson made no secret of the fact that it was through her interest with Bertold Krebs that Belle was transferred to Room 45 from Room 37, which held the second line of girls. Poor Belle Harris had played fast and loose with her youth and beauty. She was but the shadow of her old reckless self. Nobody grudged her this late promotion. Just before this business Margery Seymour had given in her notice. Before she left, her dressing-room companions were heartily sick of the name of Prince Zielenberg.

"Don't worry, girls. She's going to get off with the prince like Cinderella in the panto," said Lucy. "My brothah! My mothah! My mothah! my brothah! And the size of it! Anybody hearing her talk would

never think she was two foot nothing, would they? Where is this Vienna she was jabbering so much about?"

"Vienna is in Austria, Lucy Arnold," said Rita Vitali.

Lucy winked at the dressing-room.

"Hark at Geography Jane. Well, where's Austria, teacher?"

"In the middle of Europe."

"Oh, so Margery's going into the middle of things, is she? She'll be more deedy than ever. But I wonder who they'll push on to us in her place."

Margery's place was filled by a colourless girl called Amy Wallis, but her depressing effect on the first line of boys did not last long. Early in July the notices went up to say that the Orient would close in a fortnight and re-open early in September with a revue. No doubt, the ladies of the ballet had been expecting such an announcement for weeks now, but that did not prevent their being overwhelmed by the blow when at last it fell. Of the eighty or ninety odd girls who composed the corps de ballet not a quarter could hope to be engaged for the new production, and even those who were engaged could feel no certainty of being able to survive the critical eye of a revue producer. After all they did not pretend to be chorus girls. They were dancers not singers. It would probably end in their all getting the sack, and these whitewashed dressing-rooms which for nearly sixty years had never been empty of dancing girls would be empty now. For nearly sixty years ballet had succeeded ballet without a break except when the theatre had been closed for cleaning and decorating, and even then the girls had been paid half salary. The place on the deal form at which Lucy Arnold sat to make herself up had been sat on before her by Jenny Pearl. The place of Jenny Pearl before she came to the Orient from Covent

Garden had been the place of a girl called Maisie Rawlins, whom Rita Vitali could remember when she herself first came to the Orient in 1899. Before that there was no tradition in the dressing-room of the occupant, but occupant there had been and before her another and another, back to the days when crinolines were hanging on the dressing-room hooks and ringed black and white stockings flung down upon the forms. Every one of them had learnt the same steps, practised in the same way, talked the same jargon of the dance, dreamed the same dreams of triumphant pas seuls, and pondered with the same anxiety such dancers' problems as if their walking when they were off the stage was getting pigeon-toed or if that bone in the instep was likely to develop a very ugly lump.

On the last night of the last Orient ballet Mr. Moberley and one or two of the other old directors came on the stage and patted the girls' heads and tapped their cheeks and told them that they had always been good children and that the management was very sorry indeed to part with them. The fierce Italian maître de ballet had no heart to bang his pole that last night. He stood in the wings, the tears running down his cheeks into his black-dyed moustache, his hand clasping the hand of his fat yellow-faced French wife, who for the last twenty years had been discouraging, in his interest and her own, that habit of his of pinching the girls' behinds in dark corners of the wings. The scene-shifters, who usually swore so lustily as sweating and straining they dragged away flat or column or rostrum in the rapid changes of scene during the ballet, sweated and strained that last night in a lugubrious silence. The stage-manager, who usually took a delight in telling girls not to talk at the back of the stage and generally harassing them throughout the evening to show his power, could do nothing on this last night except smile idiotically at

every girl whose eye he caught and a moment later wipe the moisture from his pince-nez.

"Look at that dirty little rat who's the cause of this," said Lucy to Rita Vitali, pointing to the figure of Bertold Krebs standing in the wings on the prompt side, the first time he had ventured to display himself behind the scenes as the controlling influence.

Madge Wilson overheard the remark, and darted a glance at the speaker from narrowing eyes.

"All right, Madge Wilson, you needn't start giving me perishing looks," Lucy said for all to hear. "I wouldn't come back to this dog's island in the autumn, not if you was to offer me ten pounds a week on your knees. You're going to have a wonderful part in this wonderful revue, are you? Well, don't forget to put cotton-wool in your ears so as the applause you get for your marvellous performance doesn't turn you deaf."

Irene Dale had never been willing to admit Lucy Arnold's strength of personality. In the dressing-room she had never lost an opportunity to crush her, although the crushings had had no effect at all on the younger girl. Now for the first time she expressed open approval of her.

"You told her off properly," she said as the first line of boys came swinging on to the Orient stage for the last time. "For two two's I'd put my foot between her legs and send her a—e over tip into the orchestra."

And this savage sentence was uttered by Irene without stopping for a second the smile that she and the rest of the first line of boys were wearing for the audience.

When the curtain fell and rose again and again on the final group there was not a girl in the Orient corps de ballet who did not wish she could prolong this tiring last pose for hours and that the clapping in front would never stop.

Old Mr. Moberley was on the stage when the curtain at last stayed down. He had intended to make a farewell speech which he had spent two or three days in composing and had learnt by heart. When the moment came he could say nothing except:

“Good-bye, children, I hope you will all be happy. I’ve ordered drinks to be sent up to the dressing-rooms, and I hope you will drink our health as the directors and myself are going to the board room presently to drink yours and . . .” he halted . . . “and a return one day very soon to the ballet.”

“Thank you, Mr. Moberley. Thank you ever so much, Mr. Moberley,” the voices rose in chorus. Then the ladies of the ballet turned from the stage and set out slowly up the stone stairs to the dressing-rooms. On other nights they rushed off helter-skelter when the fall of the curtain released them from the final pose, and as they ran upstairs chattered and giggled all the way. To-night they neither ran nor chattered. They did not feel that the ballet would ever return.

As if the first line of boys was not sufficiently depressed by the thought that the first line of boys was a thing of the past they found Miss Chibbett waiting for it in the dressing-room, bent on a determined last effort to collect what was still owing to her in the way of instalments.

“Now, girls, you really must pay me to-night. I had a terrible loss when Queenie Danvers went off like that. Fifteen shillings she still owed me. Well, really you know that’s shocking. Lucy Arnold, I’ve got four and six still to come from you for that stole and muff you bought January last. Now do let me have it, there’s a good girl.”

Partly under the cheering influence of the drinks sent up by the management, partly because Miss Chibbett’s anxiety was so painful, the girls paid her at least a quarter

of what they owed and promised to keep in touch with her.

"You know where we live," they protested when Miss Chibbett seemed inclined to regard the rest of the money as lost. "You *are* the limit, Chibbs. You wouldn't have wanted to be paid if the theatre hadn't have been closing."

"But that's going to mean just as big a loss to me as what it is to you, girls. Look at the customers I'm losing. You don't know what it means to me with my poor old mother to keep and new stock to buy for the autumn season."

However, after one or two drinks Miss Chibbett cheered up, and when it was pointed out to her that she could always find them at the club in Green Street, Leicester Square, she became quite frisky.

"Oh, well, I do hope you girls will all find good shops for yourselves. I do reelly, because even if I do have to be a bit sharp with you sometimes you know how fond I am of you all. Good night, dears, and don't forget to come round sometimes to Ramillies Place and take a look at all my new season's bargains. You know mother always likes to see you, and Mr. Justican's so nice about it and says it doesn't disturb him not at all when you girls come round."

Miss Chibbett went off fairly well pleased with herself for she had extracted a quarter of what was owing to her from Room 45, and that was the most difficult dressing-room in the theatre to get money out of.

"You've all made up your minds you'll never see the inside of the Orient again," said Madge Wilson in an aggrieved voice. "But after all you haven't any of you applied for a job in the next show. I think you might wait until you've been refused before you start calling my Bertold all the names you can think of."

"Yes, I suppose I'll be playing lead," said Irene Dale. "Don't talk such damned rot, Madge Wilson. You know perfectly well you don't mean for me to get anything in the next show."

Madge shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, I'm leaving anyway," said Rita Vitali. "Because Edward has agreed to let me start a dancing-school."

This was exciting news, and there was a chorus of good wishes and promises to tell everybody about it.

"I think I've found just the rooms we want at the top of a house in Soho Square," Rita added.

The girls were enchanted. It would be lovely in Soho Square.

Gladys West announced that she was going to try for an engagement in the revue.

"The Baron told me he thought I was just right for revue."

"The top of the bill for Gladys," Lucy murmured, with a wink over her shoulder at the rest.

"I'd like to get into it," said Maudie Chapman wearily. "It'll be less lonely if I'm working."

This was the only triumph Madge Wilson had achieved. She could not resist being gracious.

"Well, I'm sure Bertold will use his influence, Maudie, if you really want to be in it."

The other girls were quiet out of pity. Maudie must be broken up indeed if she could bring herself to accept a favour from Madge, offered thus in public.

Lucy said nothing. She was younger than any other girl in the dressing-room. She had been a shorter time at the Orient than any of them. And she had already told Madge with satisfying frankness her opinion both of her and of her Bertold. She was sorry enough to be leaving, but there were other theatres.

Down by the stage-door the girls were saying good-bye to George. He called to Lucy as she passed.

"Here's a letter for you, Arnold. Decent-looking young chap handed it to me and paid the postage like a gent. He's waiting for his answer at the end of the court. Smile and look pretty, and you'll be the Duchess of Danzig yet."

Lucy opened the envelope. Inside was a visiting-card:

Mr. Terence Manning

Clare College, Cambridge.

P.T.O.

I wonder if you'll give me the pleasure of your company at supper. I know your people slightly.
T.M.

"He knows my people slightly," Lucy could not help gasping aloud. "Well, of all . . . oh, John Willie must be properly crushed." And with this intention she walked resolutely down the court.

The closing down of the ballet had brought round many more loiterers than usual to wait in the court and on the pavement of Jermyn Street. A fanciful observer might have conjured as many phantoms from the long past of the Orient, have looked with the mind's eye at the swells of the 'sixties with their Piccadilly weepers and strapped overalls, at the full-trousered toffs of the 'seventies, at the mashers of the 'eighties with mutton-chop whiskers and black satin Ascot ties, at the chappies

and johnnies of the 'nineties with those heavy silk moustaches which had lingered on into the Edwardian decade and were only now beginning to be forgotten in the clean-shaven nuts and nibs of the new reign. And tripping with ghostly steps beside so many of these girls of flesh and blood coming down that court after the show for the last time that fanciful observer might have beheld in crinolines and pleated skirts and bustles and balloon-sleeves their predecessors on the way to meet and greet those ogling phantoms of the Orient's long past.

From the crowd at the end of the court a young man in a dinner jacket, hatless but carrying over his arm a light grey Raglan coat, came quickly forward and smiled at Lucy, who was looking sharply round for the victim she proposed to annihilate.

"I say, Miss Arnold, do forgive me for introducing myself, but I've so often admired you from the front of the house, and to-night seemed to be my last chance to tell you so."

There was that in his voice which stayed hers. A thousand men might have said the same little speech and received in exchange no more than a contemptuous "Fancy!" Instead she shook his hand, for all the world as if they had been formally presented to one another by a mutual friend at a party.

"Did you get my card?" he asked eagerly. "Could you . . . would you come out to supper with me?"

"I don't mind," Lucy answered.

She took a sidelong glance at him as they walked along toward the grill-room of the *Café Royal* and noted that he was by no means good-looking in the conventional way, but that his sort of squashed face with that long straight nose she did not recognize as Grecian was rather attractive. He reminded her of some American fellow whose acting she had admired in the films when they first began.

They had reached the island on which Gilbert's bronze Eros presides over Piccadilly Circus, where a flower-woman who had lingered to sell her basket out after the others had gone to their homes offered her last spray of red roses. The young man bought them and offered them to Lucy.

"I saw fresher roses in your father's shop," he said.

"Yes, whatever made you go there? What a thing to do!"

"I'll tell you when we get to the *Café Royal*."

One of the minor achievements of the great war for civilization was to turn a distinguished French *café*, into a comfortable bier halle and the grill-room in which Lucy Arnold and Terence Manning had their first supper together no longer exists. On this July night, however, that discreetly lighted, sober, comfortable, and admirably tended eating-place with the best wine-list in London seemed secure against change for years to come. There were very few other guests at this hour, and the two young people found a table in the corner out of earshot of anybody even in the stillness which lay over the grill-room, a stillness above which the sounds of the white-garbed cooks at their business of grilling had an agreeably intimate sound.

"I went to your father's shop," said Terence Manning, when they had been served, she with a chop and Guinness, he with a dozen oysters and half a bottle of Chablis, "I went to your father's shop because I wanted to meet you, and I thought if I sent round my card to the back of the theatre in the ordinary way you might think I was just trying to amuse myself by picking up a girl, and so have nothing to do with me. But I thought if I got to know your people first you would understand that I was serious."

"Serious?" she repeated, aware to her mortification of what she feared was a hot blush.

"Yes, absolutely serious. I saw you first a year ago when I still had another year of Cambridge."

"At school you mean?"

He smiled.

"You might call it that, though it isn't quite the same thing."

"Go on."

"You mustn't laugh at me if I tell you that I fell in love with you at first sight. If you don't believe me, just say nothing, because I couldn't bear you to laugh and to say you didn't believe me."

"I'm not laughing, only I think it's very . . . go on."

"I told myself it was an obsession. . . ."

"What's that?" she interrupted.

"Well, a mad idea."

"You *were* being rude to yourself, weren't you?"

"But every time I went to the Orient in the vac—in the holidays—I was more firmly convinced that it was *not* a mad idea, and that I really *was* in love with you. Then I dreaded meeting you in case you should think me a lunatic, or worse think me a . . . well, you know lots of men fancy actresses are easy conquests. So I was determined to find out where you lived."

"And how did you?"

"I asked the stage-door keeper."

"And he told you?"

Terence Manning nodded.

"What a liberty! I'll properly tell him off when I go . . . but of course I won't be going to the theatre any more, will I?"

"I thought that if you knew I had been to your home you wouldn't think I was just . . ." he hesitated.

"Telling the tale," she suggested.

He nodded.

"When I asked you to marry me," he added.

"What?" Lucy exclaimed. "When you asked me to what?"

She put down her knife and fork and stared at him.

"Well, of course, I wasn't expecting you to say 'yes' right off. But I wanted to make it clear from the start that I wanted nothing except to marry you."

"Perhaps now you *have* talked to me, you don't feel quite so sure about it," Lucy suggested.

"I feel more sure than ever. I love you. You may think it sounds ridiculous, but to me it sounds as if I said 'we are sitting at supper in the grill-room of the Café Royal.' That can't be contradicted, can it? Well, I love you."

"Yes, but who are you? What are you? Where do you come from?"

"You know my name. I'm the only child of a fairly well-to-do banker called Robert Manning, and my mother is Lady Emily Manning. She's called that because she was the daughter of an impoverished Irish earl."

"And I suppose you're going to be King of England one day?"

He smiled.

"Yes, I'm sorry about the earl, Lucy, but you'll have to know these things sooner or later. We live in a house at Prince's Gate."

"Ah, I thought the Prince would enter next."

"I've finished with Cambridge, and now I'm going into my father's bank in which in due course I shall have a directorship. As soon as you promise to marry me I shall present you to my parents, and that's enough for the present. I loved your house in Goldbeater Alley."

"You wouldn't like to marry that instead of me?" Lucy asked.

"It's exactly the house I would have dreamed of for you to live in."

Lucy's disapproval of raptures was not proof against what was so evidently genuine admiration.

"Well, it is a nice old house. At least, I think so. I suppose because we liked it so much when we were kids."

"If I wanted a street that would give me the whole of London within itself I would choose Goldbeater Alley, and as you are the whole of London to me in one person I couldn't find a better place for you to live than Goldbeater Alley."

"It's funny you should talk about it like that. On the night after you left your card that day last month I came home early because a girl who used to be at the Orient was shot by her husband, and I think she and me must have been a bit alike . . . and on this night I was leaning out of the window of my room because it was a lovely warm summer's night and I was thinking I wouldn't want to live anywhere else."

"When I turned out of the crowded Strand and walked through that archway and saw the flowers in the window-boxes and the bow-fronted shops and the houses leaning over toward one another I thought of the song:

'Of all the girls that are so smart
There's none like pretty Sally;
She is the darling of my heart,
And she lives in our alley.'"

He had been singing the words softly, and all of a sudden Lucy woke up to the fact that he was violating the propriety of this sober grill-room. She shook his arm.

"Keep quiet, will you. Oh, what a terrible thing, showing me up by singing in a restaurant like this. All the waiters are staring at us."

Terence had just gone on to

"There's ne'er a lady in the land
That's half as sweet as Sally,"

when Lucy in an agony of outraged good manners caught hold of his hand.

"No, really stop it. You *are* awful. Stop it—here, what is your unnatural name? Terence, do stop."

"Well, of course, if my singing makes you hold my hand like that I shall want to sing my loudest."

"Oh, then I won't hold it."

"Ah, but I shall sing to make you hold it again."

And once again she was aware that her cheeks were flaming to a blush, because it was *his* hand she held and not just anybody's hand.

"Lucy?"

She did not respond.

"Lucy, why are you blushing?"

"I'm not."

"Lucy, you are. Your cheeks are the colour of those roses I gave you. Lucy, tell me, it doesn't seem quite so absurd now for me to say to you that when we are married we shall talk about to-night for the rest of our lives?"

"Even if I wanted to marry you, I wouldn't."

"Wouldn't you? Why not?"

"Well, because . . . oh, because I'm not the kind of girl your father and mother would expect you to marry."

"Isn't my marriage more my business than theirs?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't want to marry somebody and be looked down upon by his relations. I'd spit in their eye. But what's the sense in talking about marrying? Why, I don't . . ." she checked herself as he looked deep into her eyes. "I don't know you," she said.

"It won't take long to remedy that," Terence Manning declared gaily. "Considering that we only met one another three-quarters of an hour ago we've not done so badly."

She shook her head.

"You're very obstinate, aren't you?"

"Frightfully obstinate," he agreed fervidly. "But this I'll promise, Lucy. I won't worry you any more about marriage until you've told me that you love me."

"Of my own accord, I suppose?" she jeered.

"No, I don't demand that."

"How kind!"

"All I ask is that you'll not waste time on being dignified, but tell me at once. How old are you? I'm twenty-two. Twenty-three in November next."

"I'm twenty. I'll be twenty-one next April." She pulled herself together sharply. "Yes, and it looks as if I'm meant to be an April fool after all."

"Two and a half years older than you. Well, that's just about right."

"You are going out with yourself, aren't you?"

"I'm thinking that the sooner you can find out whether you are in love with me the sooner we'll be married. And it's really a mistake to waste time. You must remember I saw you first a year ago and had enough strength of mind to resist dashing round to the stage-door and trying to get to know you at once. Remember that, Lucy. Remember I've been thinking of you for a whole year, and that when I talk to you now about marriage like this I've already thought the whole business out."

"Hark at Willie Brains! But for all your brains you don't know how many boys I've played up," she challenged him.

"I expect you have," he said calmly. "But as I cannot believe that any of them were as much in love with you as I am, I can't feel much worried about them."

Waiters began to fidget. It was half-past twelve. The show had been late that night and the girls longer than usual in dressing.

"I'll drive you home in a taxi if you like," Terence volunteered. "But wouldn't it be jollier to walk on this lovely night?"

Lucy was a little surprised by his disdaining a taxi. She had supposed he would be sure to want to drive her back in order to get a chance of kissing her.

"And which I suppose I'd have been soppy enough to let him do," she told herself severely. "Yes, I'd like to walk," she added aloud.

They wandered slowly through the quiet streets of Soho, and careless of their direction presently found themselves much nearer to Oxford Street than to the Strand. So they walked as they were thinking Strand-wards through the quiet streets of Soho and found themselves in due course very near their starting point.

"You are taking me round the houses," Lucy said.

He drew her arm through his and they wandered accurately up Shaftesbury Avenue and into St. Martin's Lane, and so finally came to the Strand and passed through the archway between the shops into Goldbeater Alley. There was not a light to be seen in any of the old houses except in the window by which in day time hung the blackbird in his wicker-cage.

"That's the room where I sleep," she said, pointing to the next window.

"I know," he told her.

"You know? You didn't ask my father, did you?"

"No, but I've walked through here lots of times, and once I saw you combing your hair at that window."

She thumped him, a smile struggling with a blush.

"Oh, you didn't! Well, what a cheek! Fancy standing here and watching me comb my hair!"

"It was one of the best thrills I ever had," Terence declared.

"Well, I'm not going to stand talking to you here at

this time of night. Suppose somebody looked out and saw us?"

"Then somebody would only see a young man madly in love with a girl—and, Lucy," he murmured, "a girl beginning to think that perhaps she might think about falling in love with that same ardent young man?"

"You silly thing," she said in what was meant to be a severely practical tone of voice, but which somehow failed to achieve it.

"However, if you are afraid of somebody's criticism, let's walk on for a bit. You see, though *you* don't know it yet, *I* know that to-night is a night to which we are going to look back all our lives. Don't let it go by just yet."

He drew her arm through his again, and they walked on down the steps into the Adelphi, and on past the dark sedate Adam houses into Adelphi Terrace. Half a dozen Savages came out of their club, laughing and talking, but their voices soon died away round the corner, and Terence and Lucy stood by the railings, looking across the Embankment Gardens to the Thames and to a great yellow half moon hanging over the Surrey side.

"Lucy, do you think you ever will love me?"

"I think perhaps I might."

He picked up her hand and kissed it softly.

"For a year I've been wondering what would be your answer to that question."

She seemed to be trying to shake herself out of a trance.

"But Terence, we're being stupid, talking like this. We are really. I don't want to let myself love you."

"Why not?"

"Because if I ever do love I shall love too much. . . ."

"That's a very good reason for letting yourself love me."

"Why?"

"Because I love you too much already unless you are going to let yourself love me. Lucy, please try to understand I am in deadly earnest. I'm not trying to work up an amusing flirtation."

"Well, I don't think you are . . . oh, well, but I must think about you by myself. . . . I'll know more what I do think then. . . . It's lovely here, but I think I must go home now . . . don't ask me to stay any longer now . . . please, Terence."

He did not try to detain her, and they wandered back past the dark sedate Adam houses to the foot of the steps mounting to Goldbeater Alley.

"Let me go up alone," she begged urgently.

He dropped her hand, and stood watching her. She turned away, hesitated a moment or two with one foot on the first step, then swinging round she put her face to his.

"Oh, Lucy, my own," he called after her as she ran up the steps, "I'm glad you kissed me on this night of nights."

She stopped at the top and looked back at him.

"Lucy," he called. "Lucy, where will you meet me to-morrow?"

"Where you like."

She lingered over the problem, and he watching her pensive at the head of the steps in the pale radiance of the only lamp-post in the alley could have wished that it might never be solved.

"Couldn't I call for you here?" he suggested.

"What, on a Sunday afternoon?" she exclaimed. "Yes, I don't think. No, I'll meet you outside Charing Cross District station at four o'clock." To herself she added as she hurried away to her house, "And I'll wear my new saxe blue frock if it's fine."

When Lucy reached her bedroom she stood in front of the toilet-glass and looked at herself with frank

curiosity. She was trying with complete detachment to discover what there could be in the girl she saw therein reflected to fill with such fantastic ideas the head of an otherwise apparently sensible young man. Certainly men were liars, but she could not make herself believe that Terence Manning was a liar. Would she have felt as much attracted to him as she undoubtedly had felt if she had not heard that history of a year's devotion? She must not let herself be flattered into imagining herself in love. That was what most girls did, and that was why most girls usually ended up by turning round and swearing there was no such thing as love. It was difficult not to feel flattered by such a tale as she had heard to-night. But marriage? Oh no, that wasn't to be thought of. Yet it was tempting to encourage him to suppose that she was ready to marry him if only to test his sincerity. But if he was sincere it wouldn't be fair to promise she would marry him and then back out of it herself. Other girls always made such a great song about their boys being marvellous gentlemen, but nobody would have to make a song about Terence. He was clearly what he was without any testimonial from her, and standing there with him in Adelphi Terrace looking out across the river at that moon she had undoubtedly desired to abandon herself to him without reserve and without self-consciousness. He had taken nothing for granted. He had not seemed to expect that she would fall into his arms the first time he whistled to her. Yet already the fact that she should have made appointments, often with as many as three young men for the same hour, was seeming like some mischievous prank of childhood. Already she could scarcely believe in the existence of young men whom to treat thus was a matter of course. And she had even allowed some of those soppy boys to kiss her! Whatever was to happen in the future over Terence, that would never happen again. Boys

had considered her stand-offish. Had they? They should now think her the most intolerably stuck-up little beast in London.

“So perhaps I have changed since I dressed myself this evening to go down to the theatre,” she said to her reflected self.

While Lucy was putting herself to bed in a whirl which needs no description for those who have seen love face to face and which would be a waste of energy to describe for those who have not, Terence in a still dizzier whirl was wandering more or less in the direction of his own bed by way of the Embankment. “She will love me. She loves me a little already. But she will love me, she will, she will, she will.” Thus he kept assuring himself, with the river ever flowing past his heart, and because he was loath to leave that river above whose light-splashed stream he had achieved the consummation of a year’s dreams and hopes, he wandered on beside it, mile after mile, until round about half-past two he found himself in the maze of shabby-genteel little terraces which display their faded red brick where once was Cremorne. By the World’s End tavern he found a taxi and told the driver to take him to Prince’s Gate.

When the first Orient ballet was produced Cremorne was still in its heyday. It was odds that he and Lucy would have driven there in a hansom-cab, had he met her in the court after the last performance of the first Orient ballet instead of after the last performance of the last Orient ballet. But what was the use of regretting Cremorne? He and Lucy would be dead now, or within sight of death, if they had been young together in the days of Cremorne. And whatever was immortal in London gaiety was in Lucy herself. As well sigh for Vauxhall or Ranelagh, or wish that he and she could

gather watercress at Knightsbridge to-morrow morning instead of his looking out from his bedroom window at the Albert Memorial. By marrying Lucy he would never lose the eternal spirit of London. She would not change. It was the conviction of that which would make him indifferent to the inevitable opposition. If once he could persuade her that he did not want her to change she surely would not be so chary of what at present was seeming an impossible position. The completeness of that personality would not suffer any attempt to remould it to a shape which would fit into places like Prince's Gate. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to persuade her that by not changing she was truly making him happy. She might despise that other manner of life, but her scorn would not prevent her supposing him incapable of being independent of it. And then there were his people. His father should be all right. His father was so essentially a Londoner himself that he would probably understand how his son regarded Lucy. His mother, however, had no love for London and she would perceive no advantage from an intimate connection with somebody like Lucy who could have been produced by no city except London. His mother from being appalled at his marrying out of his own class would try to make the best of a very bad job by imparting to her daughter-in-law a veneer of what she would be sure was her own superiority. People like his mother were incapable of realizing that within comparatively a very few years now the notion of class distinction would be considered a relic of a but partially civilized human condition. They regarded those who like himself were unwilling to sacrifice present life to a dead past as traitors to their order. She would not comprehend that a grandson given to her by Lucy and himself would be a genuine emanation of the time instead of the museum piece that a grandson got from marriage

with a conventionally eligible young woman would be. Terence shuddered. He was imagining himself walking down the aisle of St. Margaret's, Westminster, with such a young woman on his arm. It was a macabre vision, like dreaming of the condemned cell. He pictured a bevy of those eligible débutantes in their glory as at a May Week ball in Cambridge, every one of them doomed to spend her maidenhood in the cloister of fashion, every one of them estimating her success by being able to boast at the end of the season that she had done everything everybody else had done a little more conspicuously, gone to the most exclusive dances, sold programmes at the smartest charitable functions, achieved the enclosure at Ascot, been picked out by the *Tatler* as somebody at Lord's during the Eton and Harrow match or by the *Sketch* walking across the paddock at Goodwood with a fashionable male, and if still unmarried by the time Cowes was empty flitting to the latest watering-place vogue had chosen, there to bathe and golf until the shooting season and the hunting season and winter sports contributed in turn their aid to compass an enviably *de luxe* marriage. Terence thought of their silly little smothered voices, of their silly little hungry-looking English figures, of their fear to hazard any opinion that was not one more echo in the echoing emptiness of the social creed.

And then he thought of Lucy while the taxi hummed up the wide empty lamplight of Exhibition Road. It had been at the end of the summer term a year ago that he had seen her first. Half a dozen of them had gone to the Orient after the Varsity match, and from the promenade he had picked her out when she had come dancing on with her seven companions in the sun-worship scene in the ballet of *Old Peru*. The promenade was far enough away from the stage, but not far enough to prevent his being immediately captivated by that lissom form sparkling not with gold alone but with the radiance of her

personality. He had left the rest of them fooling about in the promenade and booked himself a seat in the first row of stalls and found her more enchanting from close at hand than from a distance. His first impulse had been to send a note behind and invite her out to supper, but partly a dread of being refused and partly a fear, even if his invitation were accepted, that she would not take his devotion seriously kept him from surrendering to the impulse. In the end he had advanced no nearer to acquaintance with her than finding out from the stage-door keeper her name. Lucy Arnold!

He had gone to the Dolomites with a reading party a week later. The cattle-bells in the lonely pastures tinkled her name. It was whispered by the pines and echoed among the crags. The evening of his arrival back in London he went to the Orient again. The autumn ballet had just been produced. She was exquisite in grey silk breeches and rose-satin coat dancing a minuet in *Manon Lescaut*. And throughout the year he had continually visited the Orient, seeing her in each different dress she wore more lovely and more desirable. Yet he had taken no further steps to meet her, although he had found out from the stage-door keeper where she lived. Fortunately among the shops in Goldbeater Alley was a second-hand bookseller's on the other side of the pavement from Samuel Arnold's fruits and vegetables. Here, apparently standing close to the bow-windowed front, to read more easily the piece of tattered rubbish he held in his hand, he had kept watch over Lucy's house and at the cost of a small library of odd volumes he saw her twice come out from the door, and once on a day of days he had caught a glimpse of her combing her hair by the window of her room beside the blackbird's wicker-cage. He had been holding in his hands at the time *The Grave* of Robert Blair, and the cracked calfskin back and faded gilt lettering of that volume was now in the

book-rest by his bed, much to his mother's perplexity. Then he had thought of the idea of getting to know her father by buying fruit and flowers at his shop, and finding Samuel Arnold excellent company he had become so familiar with him that it had ended in that invitation to go through the shop to the kitchen and have a cup of tea with Lucy's mother. And now he had met Lucy herself. "She will love me, she will, she will, she will. Oh, yes surely she does love me a little already. But she will love me one day as much as I love her—as I love her . . . as I . . ."

"You did say Number 98 Prince's Gate, didn't you, sir?" the driver asked, opening the door of the taxi which Terence realized must have been drawn up in front of the house for some time.

"Thank you, sir, very much," said the driver warmly when he saw what Terence considered a reasonable fare from the World's End.

Lucy was quick enough to acknowledge to herself that she had fallen completely in love with Terence, but to all his talk of marriage she opposed an unshaken refusal. If anything had been needed to make that refusal more adamantine it was the external view of 98 Prince's Gate.

"What, go and live there? Not in these trousers. Oh, Terence, don't be silly. I'd just as leave go and live *there!*!"

She pointed to the Albert Hall.

"But you wouldn't have to live there, my dearest."

"But I'd have to go there, wouldn't I? Yes, I see myself asking some butler with crape whiskers if your mother is at home."

"Then, what are we going to do? You wouldn't like me to suggest our living together without being married."

"If you go on loving me for a year and a day, and if I go on loving you in the potty way I do now I wouldn't mind what you suggested so long as you didn't want me to marry you."

"My father wants me to go to America and study banking for a time in New York. Suppose I go away from you for six months and come back and ask you to marry me, will you say 'yes'?"

"I won't marry you, but, if you love me as much as ever when you come back and if I love you, I'll be yours as much as any marriage could ever make me."

Terence saw that it was idle to argue with her at present about marriage, and argued instead about a fur coat he was anxious to give her.

"No, I don't want you to give me a present like that, Terence. My mother would have a fit if she saw it. She'd think I'd taken the wrong turning."

"If you'd only let me meet your mother again, I'm sure I could explain everything to her."

"Cunning Isaac, aren't you? Yes, I reckon you would explain everything, and before I knew where I was she'd be edging me on to get married to such a nice young man. You're not coming to my house again. So don't you go on asking me about it, because I'm not going to let you."

"Well, what can I give you?" Terence sighed.

"You can give me a ring. But it's not to be an expensive ring, or I won't have it. So mind. Just a tiny little diamond is what I'd like best. Just one."

It took Terence some time to find a ring she considered sufficiently modest, but at last he was successful.

"I love my little ring," she declared. "And I love you."

"But not enough to marry me," he could not refrain from adding.

"Enough not to marry you," Lucy replied.

So Terence went off to New York, sailing at the end of September from Liverpool, and Lucy who was by no means so calm about it as she managed to appear fortunately found diversion for the parting by going to the first performance of the new revue at the Orient, she and Rita Vitali having decided that nothing should keep them out of the stalls on that opening night. Lucy had met Rita accidentally one afternoon when she was with Terence, and Rita had invited them to come and look at the glorious rooms she had just taken for her school at the top of an old house on the sunny side of Soho Square. The brass plate was not up yet, but it was ordered.

"And oh, I am so excited," Rita declared. "I've got one pupil already—the youngest little girl of Gertie Hemmings who was at the Orient when I first went there, and married such a nice fellow, Bob Hemmings who has a drapery business over by Harlesden."

The house on the top floor of which Rita Vitali proposed to open her school looked still much as it must have looked in the eighteenth century. The iron sockets for the links still hung in their places on either side of the arch of the gate. The room Rita had chosen ran the full breadth of the house, and had recently been evacuated by a hatmaker's establishment for more modern premises in Oxford Street. From the five tall windows one looked into the green heart of the great plane-trees in the Square. On this afternoon there was no sound of traffic, no sound indeed of anything except a distant piano-organ playing a popular tune of the moment.

"I read in some paper that Madge Wilson is the latest find of the Orient management," said Rita, with a soft laugh.

"No!" exclaimed Lucy. "Oh, how marvellous!"

Oh, she's well booked for the lost property office. But, Rita, we must go and see the first night. You'll be gone then, Terence," she added.

"Let me get seats for you," he begged eagerly.

"Hark at Albert Anxious. You never saw such a man, Rita. Always wanting to buy something. Still, if it'll make you happy, you shall buy Rita and I two stalls. And as near as possible to the front so that any girls we know can see us."

Madge Wilson's only number was not a success. As Lucy said, you didn't know she was there. Among the quartet of girls that supported her was Gladys West. To those two had the first line of boys shrunk.

"I thought Maudie was going to be in it," said Rita.

"So she was. But they pushed her out during rehearsals," Lucy replied. "The girls knew about it at the club. I went over to Alverton Street with two of the girls, but she's left and they didn't know where she'd gone to. On tour somewhere."

Lucy herself secured an engagement soon after this to dance in a musical comedy which ran through the winter and spring. After that she was engaged in a sort of miniature ballet which went round the London music-halls for a couple of months.

Terence wrote her long letters twice a week, and she wrote a short letter to him once a week. The time for them to be joined again drew close. He was due in England at the beginning of August. She had no reason to doubt that he still loved her as much as ever. On her side she felt sure of herself. During these months he had been three thousand miles away from her she had not taken even the slightest superficial interest in another man.

"They'll think I'm a girl-lover," she told Rita Vitali, twinkling.

Rita's school was growing. She now had ten pupils. "And what would you do with my mother?" Lucy went on. "She thinks I've gone gay because I get home every night before twelve. 'You're not carrying on with some man, are you?' she asked me the other day. 'Carrying on with some man,' I said, 'whatever makes you ask that?' 'Well, it isn't natural to be coming home early every night like this. What do you do with yourself in the afternoons? You're not going round to some fellow's flat, are you?' Well, I had to laugh, but fancy, what a thing to say."

War was declared a day or two before Terence reached England.

Lucy decided that everybody had gone barmy, which was a good deal nearer to the truth than most people attained at that hectic time. She had hoped that Terence would prove to be a sane exception, but to her disappointment he proved to have gone as barmy as everybody else.

"My darling, it's absolutely damnable, but you wouldn't really like me to stay at home when all my friends are joining the army. Lucy, you wouldn't, would you?"

"I don't see why you've got to go. One won't make any difference to who wins," she pointed out with a logic he found difficult to answer.

"No, it won't make any difference to the war, but it will make a great difference to me."

"And what about me?"

Not much use quoting to her the lines of Lovelace. She would have no use for the sentiments of a dead poet. And who should say if Lucasta herself was any more susceptible to their force than Lucy would be?

"Will you love me less if I go?" he asked.
She was silent.

"Will you fall out of love with me altogether?"

"I might," she answered sullenly.

"Well, as I don't seem able to persuade you that I love you so much that I cannot be happy until we are married, I'll give up the idea of enlisting or getting a commission if you'll marry me right away."

At this stage of the war when people were talking of its being over in a month or two Lucy did not feel there was any danger for Terence if he joined the army. His anxiety to do so struck her as merely a weak surrender to a craze of the moment. Therefore she regarded his attempt to force her hand in the matter of marriage as taking advantage of her unworthily.

"I told you I wouldn't marry you, Terence. I said if you loved me as much when you came back from America as you did before you went and if I loved you as much I would be yours as much as any marriage could make me. Well, if you won't have anything to do with this mad war and army nonsense, you needn't bother about marriage. And I'll never love anybody only you."

"But, Lucy, you don't quite understand the position. I couldn't give up doing what I believe I ought to do for anything except marriage. If you don't understand why, I don't think I can properly explain to you."

"All right, then," she said coldly. "Follow the man from Cook's and do what all the others are doing. Only don't expect me to think you a wonderful hero, because I won't. I just think you're stupid."

"Then you'll have to think me stupid."

So Terence went off and enlisted in some public-school battalion from which he soon obtained a commission. For several weeks Lucy refused to see him, but when the war showed no sign of coming to an end, and when she began to realize that her lover's irrational, vain,

cowardly, and selfish behaviour in joining up might too easily be the death of him she wrote:

My darling Terence,

I think I have been a pig and I am very sorry. Write and tell me where to meet you and what day because I really am very sorry.

*Your loving
Lucy.*

So they met where they had so often met outside the District Railway Station of Charing Cross, and Lucy heard from his lips that he expected to be ordered to France soon after the New Year. It was a gusty day at October's end, and paper boys were screaming the war news, which was grave enough, with the struggle for Ypres in bloody progress. Neither alluded to the question at issue between them. They walked for a while in heart's ease about the deserted gardens beside the Embankment until it began to rain heavily when they retired to a cinema theatre in Villiers Street. Lucy snuggled close, and to the accompaniment of a tinny piano and cowboys galloping across the screen they sighed out their love for one another. It was dusk when they came out of the cinema theatre. The north-west wind was surging across Trafalgar Square. They battled against it arm in arm, making their way to some small tea-shop in Regent Street where they had often sat long hours, before Terence had gone to America. But still no allusion was made to the issue between them.

"I'll have to catch a train at Waterloo just after seven," Terence announced at last. "I'll drive you as far as the Strand and drop you there before I go on to the station."

"Don't you want me to come and see you off?"

"No, darling, I'd rather kiss you good-bye in the

taxi. There'll come a time one day soon when I'll have to kiss you good-bye in a taxi for a very long time."

Lucy felt a chill upon her heart, and when they were in the taxi she clung to Terence in a panic over the future. Just before Charing Cross Station they were held up by a policeman to allow some ambulances to drive out through the station gates. A knot of young women were feeding their wartime emotion by throwing bunches of flowers at the windows to salute the wounded men inside.

Lucy asked what those silly idiots were doing and on being told her panic grew.

"You might come back like that, Terence?" she asked.

"Or I might not. I might never come back—even like that. Oh, Lucy, Lucy, can't you understand now why I want to marry you, why I couldn't agree to anything else?"

"Well, I suppose I'm being very stupid, but I will marry you."

Terence leaned out of the window.

"Drive right on to Waterloo," he said. Then sinking back into the dimness of the taxi he folded her to him.

"My Lucy," he sighed in an ineffable content. "I know now that you do love me."

"Of course I love you; but oh, Terence, I am going to be miserable."

"Now listen, here's a compromise," he said eagerly. "I quite see that it wouldn't be fair to leave you to deal with the problems of parents and Prince's Gate and all the rest of it. So we'll be married secretly. If anything should happen to me, you'll be free to do what you like. And if nothing happens to me, why, then we'll storm Prince's Gate together, and it will be much easier than you think. How I wish you had agreed to marry me last year so that our honeymoon wouldn't have been at

the mercy of the military authorities. And I wish I'd asked for leave to spend the night in town. However, if I had we shouldn't have driven past Charing Cross when those ambulances were coming out, and at this moment we mightn't have been engaged. Lucy, Lucy, I adore you."

"I think I must adore *you* to be so soppy and say 'yes' after saying 'no' for such a long time," she murmured ruefully.

Presently they were driving up the entrance to Waterloo Station, locked in a last embrace beneath the echoing gloom of that sombre arcade.

Thus it befell that on a foggy morning toward the end of November, upon Terence's twenty-fourth birthday, he and Lucy were married in the ugly eighteenth-century church of which she was a parishioner. The secrecy of the wedding was complete. There was neither bridesmaid nor best man, and as witnesses two tramps sheltering in the church earned an unexpected half-crown apiece. Terence had secured a couple of nights' leave, and the brief honeymoon was spent no further away than the Star and Garter at Richmond.

"Where nobody's going to think we really are married," Lucy commented. However, by this time the sexual upheaval caused by war was making such escapades too common for the waitresses and chambermaids to give a second thought to the status of guests in khaki. Three times again before Terence was ordered to France were he and Lucy able to lie all night in each other's arms, and on each successive occasion Mrs. Arnold's enquiries into Lucy's whereabouts became more pressing.

"I don't like it, Lucy, and that's telling you flat. Once a girl starts spending the night with friends her mother can expect the worst. Where actually have you been these last three nights?"

Lucy worn out by the misery of the parting and

conscious of Terence's presence still in England and of her own inability to see the very last of him, replied to her mother sharply.

"I'll have no back answers from you, miss, if you please."

"You seem to forget I was twenty-two last week."

"I don't forget you're living in your parents' house, and so long as you are you'll set an example to your sister Margaret and you'll not treat it like an hotel."

"If you're going to nag at me like this for nothing, mother, I'll leave home. I've told you that I've done nothing wrong. If you don't believe me, there's nothing more to be said."

Perhaps the long step forward Lucy had taken toward the accomplishment of her destiny had given her manner a resolution which communicated itself to her mother. At any rate, Mrs. Arnold said no more.

Two months later Lucy was convinced without any possibility of alternate explanation that she was going to have a baby.

"Well, that's properly torn it," she said to herself. "And I suppose Nosey Parker will have to know that when I write and tell Terence."

Nosey Parker was the censor whose activities in the matter of private correspondence was in Lucy's opinion the most incontrovertible proof of all that in going to war the world had gone raving mad.

Terence had paid into his wife's account at a bank a sum of money before leaving for the front, but this she had assured him nothing would induce her to touch, and she had declined firmly even to learn how to write a cheque. She intended to do all she could to keep in an engagement. So far she had been successful. But this baby was going to tear it properly.

Lucy went back in her mind to recall how long the various girls she had known had been able to dance

before surrendering to their condition. Rita Vitali had been off only two months, and she had had twins. Elsie Crawford, another twin-getter, had given up two months earlier than Rita. Maudie Chapman had stuck it for six months. Of course a good many girls had had miscarriages, but they had occurred quite early on and probably they had wanted them really. Belle Harris had danced right up to the night before she had that operation, and was back at the theatre four days later, looking like a ghost, yes, but she had got through the night without actually fainting. She herself ought to be able to dance up till next October, and surely this unnatural war would be over by then. The worst of it was that most people seemed to enjoy it all the more the longer it went on. Dressing themselves up to kill, just because a lot of poor devils were dressed up to be killed. If all those war-workers had to wear convicts' clothes, there wouldn't be quite so many of them. There was dad now, worrying because he was too old to go and fight. Let him try dressing up in uniform to make himself important at home, and he'd get well told off. And young Will—silly little fool—saying the other night he hoped the war would go on long enough for him to get into the army. Mad! And Margaret, with a job in some Government office, banging her typewriter as if it were a gun, and mother fussing round her when she came home at night as if she had been fired at all the way up Whitehall. Potty! Yes, and wondering why Lucy didn't try for a job munition-making. Barmy! But that suggestion had been properly crushed.

“Thanks, I'd sooner think I was helping in my own way to give some poor devil back from the front a jolly evening than think I was helping to make bombs or whatever these deedy bitches do make to keep the war keeping on.”

“Lucy, if I've told you once I've told you a dozen

times lately I will not have such language from you in this house."

"Well, you shouldn't talk such silly soppy rot, mother, and get me into a paddy."

"Of course, what *you* want, Lou," her father put in, "is to come round to the Market with me of a morning and try to buy a few vegetables at a reasonable price. You wouldn't have no language left for the rest of the day if you did. I knocked over a basket of peas in the shop this afternoon right on to my favourite corn, and I hadn't enough language left to as much as say 'bother.'"

"Sam!" his wife said sharply.

"Yes, Maggie?"

"You don't help me to put a bit of sense into Lucy's head by telling silly stories about your own troubles."

Yes, she ought to be able to chance it up till October, and the war *might* be over then. Yes, but even if it was, this baby would still be just as much of a problem. If she were to tell her mother she was married to Terence, her mother would never see her point of view. She would be bound to insist on the marriage being made public. Yes, and just to stop the neighbours in Goldbeater Alley talking she would have to enter that unnatural house in Prince's Gate. And Terence would have his own way. Terence would be delighted when he heard about this baby coming. He was a darling was Terence, but he didn't seem to have any idea what the future was going to mean to the girl he had married.

"And if it hadn't been for this mad war, I wouldn't ever have married him. If he didn't want to take what I offered him, well, we'd just have had to say good-bye to one another. And if he hadn't been married he'd have been more careful about me having a baby. He'd have had to be then."

Lucy came home early from the theatre as she always did nowadays. She was particularly early in her present

engagement, because her last dance was over by ten o'clock.

It was such another warm June evening as that in which the news of Jenny Pearl's death had reached the Orient two years ago. Lucy's father and mother were still sitting up in the kitchen when she got home; but Margaret was out at a theatre with some young officer by whose interest in Margaret her mother was much impressed, and not at all pleased when Lucy said officers were thirteen for twelve anywhere in London nowadays. Her brother Will, who was now sent off to Covent Garden once or twice a week to get into the way of buying, had gone to bed.

The greengrocer, corncob-pipe in mouth, was reading his morning paper.

"Hullo," he said, "here's a queer go. It ain't often I read the casualty lists, but every time I do I see some name I know. Maggie, you remember that young fellow as used to come round and buy fruit and stuff from me and who I took a bit of a fancy to, and asked him in to have a cup of tea one afternoon?"

Lucy turned aside to conceal the swift flight of colour from her face.

"I remember his name very well—Terence Manning," her father continued. "Well, here he is down among the wounded. A rare nice young chap he was. A bit of a nob too, I reckon, though he didn't give himself no airs."

"Ah, I daresay, but I'm afraid there'll be a good many more nice young chaps dead and wounded before this dreadful war stops," observed Mrs. Arnold.

"Yes," Lucy cried, trying to conceal her agitation under a display of temper. "Yes, thousands and thousands of them, and yet you'd like for me to go off and earn twice as much as what I earn at dancing by making munitions to help kill and wound a few more of them."

Lady Emily Manning sat on one side, his father on the other of their son's bed in that hospital somewhere in the Midlands where he had been sent back from Flanders with many bits of shrapnel still to be extracted from his body. It was from his father that Terence had inherited his Grecian nose and attractively squashed-looking face, from his mother that soft voice and those warm grey eyes. That morning he had heard from Lucy her news. The easiest way to break it to his parents was to give them her letter to read:

My darling Terence,

I hope you are not wounded too badly and I hope I shall soon be able to see you because I have some news for you. We are going to have a baby. I would not have told you about this if you had not been wounded but I think the news will do you good. I hope it will because I have been very worried because now I suppose it will all come out. Write to me as soon as you can and say when I can see you. We made good plans but they do not seem to have quite come off do they.

*Always
Your loving
Lucy.*

Lady Emily passed the letter to her husband without comment. The genial banker read it through in turn.

"Well, well, my boy, these accidents happen. We must do all we can to help the girl."

"Certainly," Lady Emily agreed.

"These awkward matters can always be arranged if one has the means to provide the necessary inducement. You needn't worry. I hope we shall be able to spare her in every way. She seems a decent sort of girl. I see she doesn't attempt to reproach you. I call that very decent of her."

"But I don't think you realize, father, that Lucy and I are married."

Lady Emily stiffened.

"Married? Married, Terry?"

She looked round as if she wanted a nurse to take his temperature.

"No, mother, I'm not feverish. Lucy and I were married last November."

"But . . . but," she looked at the letter again, "but this is not the handwriting . . . but who is this girl?"

"I'm afraid she's everything of which at first you will most disapprove. She was in the ballet at the Orient when I saw her first, and she is now dancing at the Vanity Theatre." Lady Emily gasped faintly, but Terence continued. "Her father is a greengrocer with a shop just off the Strand. Lucy herself is a completely typical London girl."

"With a Cockney accent, I suppose," Lady Emily groaned.

"With a most perfect Cockney accent, dearest mother, which I hope is ineradicable," her son confirmed.

"This is a dreadful shock to me, Terry."

"Nothing like the shock it was to me when I was hit," he said gently.

The banker chuckled.

"What does she look like—this daughter-in-law of mine?"

Terence gave his father a grateful smile.

"I think she's lovely, and from what I know of your taste I think you'll do the same. She's slim and fair—well, she's slim and fair and not very tall."

"A very comprehensive description," said the banker. "And apparently the hussy is going to present me with a grandchild."

"We can't discuss this business in a hospital ward,"

Lady Emily interrupted. "At the moment my head is in a whirl."

"So is mine, mother. I don't want to say anything unkind, but I'm afraid after being out there I feel more convinced than ever that a man can't afford to let happiness pass him by because his happiness doesn't coincide exactly with the conventional ideas of other people."

"You would hardly describe your mother and father as other people," Lady Emily suggested.

"Well, you're not me."

"Come, come, Emily, I think you were wiser when you said that the matter can't be discussed here. I'm not going to congratulate you just yet, Terence, but you can rely upon my doing all you would wish me to do."

"Thanks, father. And mother, I must say just this before you go. I loved Lucy for a year before I met her. I wanted her to marry me then. She would not. I went to New York, and when I came back she still would not marry me, not because she didn't love me but because she didn't want to sacrifice her own background in order to fit into ours and also because she thought I would be worried and made unhappy by her refusal to do so. In the end she married me because I was going out to France and she believed her refusal to marry me was making me miserable, as indeed it was. It was I who thought of this secret marriage, partly on her account and partly on yours, because I did not want to go off to the front and have anything happen to me and so give you something to regret for the rest of your life. Of course I had arranged that if anything did happen to me you would know all about Lucy, and I felt sure that father would turn up trumps."

The effort of this speech had tired Terence. He lay back on his pillows and closed his eyes. A nurse who had been watching the interview with one eye came along

and suggested that perhaps the patient had talked enough for his strength.

"I don't like to say that Terry has taken a mean advantage of us, Robert," Lady Emily said to her husband when they were driving away from the hospital, "but he has not treated us fairly."

The banker demurred. "I wouldn't say that, Emily. The expected arrival of this infant has forced the boy's hand."

"But there was presumably no infant expected when he married this girl, Lucy . . . why, we don't even know her other name. A little Cockney ballet dancer. That's all we know about her."

"But we know something of Terry," her husband pointed out. "And I'm not prepared to believe he has made such a complete ass of himself as you seem to think."

"Not of himself, perhaps. But what of us?"

"He has married her, my dear. And the wise man marries for his own happiness not to gratify his parents. I've never told you this before, but when I became engaged to you, do you know what my old father said?"

"He was capable of saying anything," Lady Emily observed frigidly.

"He said, 'Robert, my boy, you've been hooked by the daughter of a penniless and hungry lord, and I think you're a damned fool. But she's your wife, Robert. She's not mine. And his lordship is your father-in-law, he's not mine, thank God. So that being the case I'm holding my tongue!'"

"After wagging it quite enough first," Lady Emily exclaimed indignantly.

"Well, in spite of being hooked," the banker added with a sly smile, "you can't deny ours has been as happy a marriage as that of anybody we know. And wasn't that

because there was nobody alive who was so much longing to be hooked by you, Emily, my very dear Emily, as I was. Well, I married an earl's daughter against my father's will, or at least against his wish. My son has married a greengrocer's daughter without finding out in advance what his father thought of it, and I've made up my mind, Emily, that twenty-five years hence he shall not tell his Lucy the same kind of story about me as I've just told you about the old gentleman, who was a very fine old gentleman, but would have seemed to me a still finer old gentleman if he had appreciated my Emily."

"You always find a way of getting round me, Robert," she said reproachfully.

"And isn't that one of the secrets of our happiness together for all these years?"

"I wish Terry would imitate his father."

"Terry isn't your husband, my dear."

"He's my son."

"And isn't that the very reason why he takes after his mother?" asked the jovial banker, with a triumphant chuckle.

Lucy's apprehensions about existence in Prince's Gate proved substantial enough during the first year or two of married life. Her difficulties were relieved for a while by Terence's military duties, which began after a short spell of convalescence and took him to some south-coast watering-place where Lucy was able to live in lodgings and have a good deal of his company. In due course, however, he was sent back to the western front, and no arguments availed Lucy to escape from Prince's Gate for the last two months of her pregnancy. She tried to win over her own mother to her side; but Mrs. Arnold insisted that her proper place was in her husband's house and that the child must be born in the surroundings

in which he would have to spend his life. Even Terence could not be persuaded that at such a time of national stress it was advisable for Lucy to be living by herself, which was what she wanted to do when her mother ruled out the idea of her continuing to live at home.

Lucy's condition naturally aggravated her state of mind, for sensitiveness to her appearance prevented her going out, and in the dull days of November and December with their swiftly coming darkness she was much alone in that large house, so extremely comfortable by the standards of those who had long lived in it, but to Lucy a gloomy barrack, the gloom of which was not in the least lightened by the thickness of the carpets on those stairs that seemed far more interminable than the stairs of the Orient after the most exhausting rehearsal. She hated ringing for the servants, and so used those stairs much more often than she needed. She hated dinner in the evening, in spite of her father-in-law's determined efforts to amuse her. She hated the decorous quiet of the waiting. She hated being called by the housemaid on those pinched wintry mornings. She hated the mournful misty waste of Hyde Park which stretched away before her bedroom window. And most of all she hated those long lamplit tête-à-têtes with her mother-in-law in the big double drawing-room between tea and dinner. Lady Emily was sincerely trying to make friends with this sullen-seeming little daughter-in-law of hers, but on account of Lucy's taciturnity she was driven into asking questions in the hope of starting a conversation, and every one of these questions Lucy resented either as an attempt to pry, out of idle inquisitiveness, into her previous life or as a subtle method of revealing to her the comparative barbarism of that past.

It said much for Lucy's depression of spirits that, when she received a letter from Margery Seymour

announcing her engagement to Captain Orchardson-Browne and expressing a desire to meet Lucy again and give her an account of her adventures in Austria, she should have written back inviting Margery to tea. She felt that Margery would be capable of holding her own with Lady Emily's superiority, and a visit from her would at least relieve the strain of one of those endless afternoons at Prince's Gate. "My mothah! My brothah! My brothah! My mothah!" That ought to cheer up Lady Emily.

So Margery arrived, looking really very smart in a grey squirrel coat, and Lucy observed with a good deal of sardonic amusement that Lady Emily responded most graciously to this unusual specimen of ballet-girl.

"My mothah told me that many years ago she once had the pleasure of meeting the late Lord Lisgar at Cannes."

"Yes, my father lived there for the last ten years of his life. Are you living at home with your mother, Miss Seymour?"

"Yes, we have a flat in Earl's Court. But we were in Austria with my brothah until war broke out. My brothah was nearly interned, but after terrible adventures we all got back to England."

And then Margery launched forth into an account of those terrible adventures which did not sound at all terrible to Lucy, for they seemed to consist entirely either of missing trains or of finding trains too crowded to travel in comfortably or of difficulties in changing money and getting passports. However, Lady Emily apparently found these adventures terrible enough to keep her thoroughly entertained.

"And you used to dance with my daughter in-law at the Orient, I believe, Miss Seymour?"

"Yes, Lucy and I were together, weren't we, deah?"

"Oh yes, we were both ballet-hoppers," Lucy assented.

"And now you are engaged to be married, I hear?" Lady Emily said hurriedly.

"Yes, to Captain Geoffrey Orchardson-Browne. He's not a regulah soldier, but he was in the Territorials—and his battalion was one of the first territorial battalions to go to the front. Mothah and I met him in Austria, and if we'd taken his advice we should have left before we did. Geoffrey . . . Captain Orchardson-Browne . . . my fiancé has an absolutely uncanny knack of knowing what's coming."

"I'll bet he didn't know he was going to be hooked by Margery's mothah!" Lucy thought.

"Yes, you know, he felt absolutely sure he was going to be wounded," Margery prattled on, "when he went back after his last leave. And he was wounded. Wasn't that extraordinary?"

"It would have been a jolly sight more extraordinary if he hadn't been wounded," Lucy said contemptuously. She had welcomed the prospect of meeting Margery Seymour again to talk over old times at the Orient, not to hear her laying off like this about another of these officers at thirteen for twelve.

"Oh, Lucy, you were always so cynical," Margery said, shaking her head at her in mock reproof—like some damned school-teacher showing off in front of the inspector, Lucy told herself. "Still, I oughtn't to complain," Margery was burbling on, "because it was when he was convalescent that Geoffrey proposed to me."

Lucy eyed her.

"Yes," she thought, "I bet you and this flash mothah of yours well put it across poor Geoffrey when he hardly knew one end of the room from the other."

"And we are going to have a very quiet wedding in January," Margery continued. "There seems a chance

of my brothah getting leave, and then of course he'll be able to give me away. Geoffrey is down at Hythe now at the School of Musketry. Isn't this war dreadful, Lady Emily?"

"Ghastly," Lady Emily agreed.

"It's more stupid than anything, *I think*," said Lucy. "Well, haven't you got any news about the other girls, Dolly Grey?"

"Isn't she dreadful, Lady Emily? She was always such a frightful tease. No, Lucy, I'm afraid I haven't seen any of the girls who were with us at the Orient. Oh yes, I did meet Queenie Danvers the other day in Sloane Street. She's working in one of the Intelligence offices. In fact from what I could gather she's acting as private secretary to a rather important person. I was surprised to hear she had given up the stage and taken up stenography."

Evidently Margery had heard nothing of the reason for Queenie's change of profession. Oh well, she was not going to be the one to enlighten Mrs. Bigmouth.

"I wish, Lucy, you would come round and have tea with mothah and me at Fopstone Mansions one afternoon," was now being suggested.

"No thanks, I'm not going out until I look less like a prize marrow."

"May one ask when the happy event is likely to be?"

"Of course you may ask, dear, but I mightn't answer."

"Lucy," her mother-in-law protested. "I think you're being rather unkind to Miss Seymour."

"Oh, she's used to it, aren't you, Marge?"

Margery and Lady Emily both winced at the abbreviation, to the keen gratification of Lucy, who was wanting this visit to come to an end.

"Well, I liked your little friend," said Lady Emily when Margery had gone. "I wonder who her mother was."

"I wonder," said Lucy enigmatically.

The real struggle between Lucy and her mother-in-law began after the birth of Lucius, a name which Lady Emily had tried to oppose because she fancied that in suggesting it Terry was evincing a deplorable uxoriousness. Unfortunately for her Terry was able to demonstrate that Lucius was a family name of the Pallisers and though never actually borne by the heir to the now extinct earldom was too frequent in family chronicles to be overlooked.

Lucy was not particularly anxious to have the baby called Lucius; but when she found Claude was being suggested by Lady Emily as her choice she gave strong support to Lucius. A nice game if she was to meet one of the girls and have to tell her she had a son called Claude. She would only need to produce a daughter and call her Gwendolen and her family would top the bill as a comic turn on their names alone.

Terence obtained some welcome leave just about a fortnight after his son was born in January. He was a captain now, which Lucy thought ridiculous.

"Yes, for a lion-tamer or a ring-master Captain Manning would be grand, but not for you, Terence."

"And I hear I've been recommended for the Military Cross," Terence added, knowing perfectly well that the honour would leave his wife utterly unmoved, but incapable of resisting the temptation to tell her.

"Fancy! The military cross. But not half as cross as the military's wives. And I suppose you're glad you've got this military cross?"

"Yes, I am."

"Fancy! Little things please little minds, don't they? No, but really, Terence, you must say something to your mother about the way she wants to manage Lucius. No really, it's past a joke. I had to be rude to her the other day. I had to say 'Look here, did you

produce this infant or me?' Well, I haven't been rolling around like a prize marrow for the last three months for her to have all the fun as soon as I can see my own shoes again. Lucius is my baby, and for the first few years he's going to stay my baby. When he goes to school you can move up to the front seats. But granny must be told that she's only an understudy in this production. And *I'll* engage his regular nurse when this monthly Beauty Queen pushes off. You've got to make your mother understand that, Terence. I'm going to have a nurse who *I* like and who isn't going to think I'm just a rubber tit or a bone-ring for her to put in his mouth when *she* thinks fit."

When Terence went back again to the everlasting front Lucy found an ally in her father-in-law. The jovial banker had much enjoyed her presence in Prince's Gate during these winter months of war. He had been too well aware of the danger of antagonizing his wife by making much fuss over Lucy at first; but gradually he and she had become genuinely fond of each other. Lucy's Cockney sophistication made her seem older than she was, and yet in outward appearance she seemed to grow younger all the time instead of older. Robert Manning found the combination irresistible. Lucy flattered him by affecting to believe that he had been a rare dog in his younger days and he flattered her by expressing his delight that Terence had had the good sense to choose for himself a woman for whom he had to fight with the world.

"He's got to carry you off, my dear. He's got to justify himself. Yes, and you've got to carry him off, by gad. You can't afford any more than he can to make a mess of things. Neither of you wants to hear 'I told you so.' Don't worry too much about your mother-in-law. Bit by bit you'll get to understand one another and in understanding one another esteem one another. How

would you like, if and when Terry comes back safe after the war, to go out with him to Australia? We have a big business there, and Terry could hold a post for five or six years, and you could come back in time to establish Lucius at school and show the grandparents any additions made meanwhile. And perhaps when you'd been out there a year or two Emily could come out and pay you a visit in your house, what? You see the idea, don't you? So long as you stay here and Terry is away all the time the tussle is bound to continue."

And the tussle did continue, although in the course of it both Lucy and her mother-in-law did come to respect each other more and more.

"I'm bound to admit, Robert," said his wife some two years after the birth of Lucius, "that Lucy does manage that child with great firmness. I could not help asking myself whether, if I had managed Terry with equal firmness from the first, he would ever have made the match he did."

"It was lucky for the boy then that you spoilt him a bit, for his marriage was a revelation of good sense for which his career at Rugby and Cambridge had not prepared me."

"I can't say I'm quite convinced yet of this good sense. I agree that if Lucy had come from his own class she would have been an admirable wife for him. I will agree to that, Robert. But she is so deplorably, indeed so aggressively of her own class. In spite of all I do to instil other ideas into her obstinate little noddle, she makes not the slightest effort to improve her style of speech or to soften down her definite disapproval of what she considers are *our* unfortunate affectations. She manages Lucius perfectly, but what will his accent be when he begins really to talk? I shudder to think of it."

"Don't worry yourself about that. Accents are easily

dealt with, and even if the accent were permanent there would still be nothing to worry about because Lucius will inherit quite enough to make him independent of his speech."

Lady Emily made a gesture of helplessness before such easy-going optimism.

And if Lucy had her tussles with her mother-in-law she had many a tussle too with her own mother. She visited the home in Goldbeater Alley with unfailing regularity. She helped her younger sister Margaret to dress herself smartly. She helped her older sister Vera to cope with a rapidly increasing family. She was kind to her young brother Will, who having achieved his ambition to get into the army only thought now he was in it of when he would be out of it. Yet notwithstanding all this Mrs. Arnold was discontented. She felt that her daughter's refusal to introduce her to her husband's grand relations was a slight.

"It seems so funny to have your daughter married and never catch so much as a glimpse of her 'in-laws.' It makes me feel so silly when one of the neighbours asks questions."

"You should tell them not to smudge their noses poking them into other people's business," said Lucy severely.

"And Terence doesn't come here hardly ever, and I know that's your doing," Mrs. Arnold grumbled. "I'm bound to say any time he does come he goes out of his way to make himself very civil; but every time I throw out a hint about liking to see where you live he turns it off with a look at you, and which means he's afraid of doing anything without *your* leave, and which I think isn't good for any man."

"Hear, hear," said her husband cordially.

"And no sarcastic remarks were called for from you, Samuel Arnold," his wife snapped tartly.

Sam winked at his daughter with whose policy he was in the profoundest accord.

"I wish you wouldn't go on about it, mother. What's the good of working yourself up over a thing? You wouldn't enjoy meeting my 'in-laws' as you call them and I wouldn't enjoy it either. You see plenty of me, and I bring Lucius to see you twice a week. What more do you want? Anyway, as soon as this war's over Terence and I are going out to Australia."

"Emigrating?" asked Sam Arnold in some alarm.

"Don't be silly, dad. Mr. Manning has a lot of business out there at which Terence is going to work for the bank. We'll be back after about five years. So what's the use of mother dressing up to go and see Lady Emily, and then we go away?"

"That's quite right, Maggie," said Sam.

"Oh, of course anything's 'quite right, Maggie,' if it's quite wrong for me. All I know is that this is the first time I ever heard of a daughter who went off and got married in secret and never said a word about it till she was going to have a baby and then wouldn't let any of her family across her front door-mat. You can't blame that behaviour on the war. The war's done a lot, but it hasn't done that anyway. And it was me who first insisted on you going to live in Prince's Gate."

"I sized things up the way they would be when I said I wouldn't marry Terence and wanted to live with him instead," said Lucy. "If I'd done that, you wouldn't have met his family."

"Indeed no," Mrs. Arnold agreed, trying to assume what she believed to be a prim expression.

"But the way things happened I let myself be persuaded to marry him. And then it couldn't be kept secret after all. But I made up my mind the way my life was to go after that, and nothing you can say will change it. It's been quite difficult enough for me to be dragged

about all over London as Terence's wife. I'm not going to make a poppy-show of my relations as well."

And no complaints that Mrs. Arnold knew how to make availed to turn Lucy from that resolve, until three months after the Armistice Terence managed to extract himself from the army, when he with Lucy and Lucius, four years old now, sailed for Sydney, New South Wales.

INTERLUDE

INTERLUDE

ABOUT noon of a bright June day, twelve years after the date from which this figure of eight began to be traced, Lucy Arnold (in that figure she remains Lucy Arnold) was walking slowly along Coventry Street from the Piccadilly Tube Station with the intention of looking into the shop windows of Russell's and Stagg and Mantle's.

Terence and she, with Joan, who would be six next October, and Margaret, who would be five in August, had returned six months ago from Australia to live henceforth permanently in England. Lucius had come back with his grandmother the previous year in order to enter a preparatory school. This morning was the first time since coming home that Lucy had had an opportunity of such an outing, on which she had deliberately embarked alone in order not to interfere with the retrospective mood in which she was indulging herself.

The experiment of the banker in arranging for his son to hold a post for some years away from England had been entirely successful. When Lady Emily had seen Lucy in her own house against the Australian background the desire to transform her socially had vanished, and when she had returned after her second visit, entrusted with the responsibility of getting Lucius safely settled at his preparatory school, she longed for nothing more deeply than for her daughter-in-law to come back and take her place at the head of the house she had found for Terence and Lucy at the far end of Cheyne Walk beyond Battersea Bridge.

The decorating and furnishing of this house had been absorbing all Lucy's energy almost ever since she returned, during which time she and Terence with the children had stayed at Prince's Gate. Lucius had grown into a charming boy with a strong resemblance to his grandfather the jovial banker. Joan was extremely like her mother, with hair as yellow as a new guinea, and Margaret, though named after her other grandmother, showed signs already of becoming a second Lady Emily.

Lucy's father and mother still lived in Goldbeater Alley; but the ban upon their presentation at Prince's Gate was no longer in force, and Mrs. Arnold if inclined to be shy of Lady Emily found Lucy's genial father-in-law the easiest and the best of company. Lucy's sister Margaret was married to an agreeable young man in a chartered accountant's office and lived at Dollis Hill in the miniature grandeur of a house which looked like a minute corner of Compton Wynnyates or Haddon Hall, with a baby Austin car and an exclusive tennis-club and plus fours and a crystal wireless-set and in fact all the reasonably priced amenities of the twentieth century. Will had not yet married; but he had developed his father's business, and there was talk of opening another shop. Sam Arnold himself, hale as ever at sixty-two, enjoyed greatly a visit from his son-in-law, and would have enjoyed equally the visits from his grandchildren if such visits had not always ended in a battle between himself and his wife or his daughter or his daughter's nurse over the amount of plums or cherries or pears or gooseberries a child was capable of digesting.

"It's a pity Eve wasn't as particular about fruit as what you all are. Then she wouldn't have caused such a how-dye-do in the world. I never knew such women. Talk about harpers at the feast! As soon as I put a couple of white currants in young Joan's hands you'd

think I'd turned her loose in an orchard. 'No, darling, no more currants to-day, you've eaten quite enough.' It's a good job everybody isn't like you, or I'd have had to put my shutters up and start hawking bootlaces for a living. Yet you'll let the poor kids munch away at a banana, which isn't a fruit or a vegetable or a good honest nut, and which tastes like hair oil, peardrops and ointment. But put a nice lively currant or a good juicy plum in their fingers, and it's going to kill 'em. And I'm surprised at you, Maggie. Before Lucy was born I remember you had a craving for raspberries and which was a silly thing to start craving for in the middle of February, and when I . . ."

"Sam!" his wife interrupted sharply, "will you remember you're in your own house and not in the bar of the Fox in the Hole. That's all I want to hear about fruit, thank you."

"And then," Sam said to his daughter, "you wonder I don't ever come round and see you at home. It's quite enough to be shown up in front of that flash nurse of yours, and who can walk into strawberries herself like four hundred starving blackbirds. No, you thank the kid's grandmother kindly for me, and give her this basket of roses I got specially for her in Covent Garden this morning, but say I don't think I'll come out to Prince's Gate."

Nor had he yet been persuaded to visit the new house in Cheyne Walk, with its narrow garden in front gay with flowers and that spacious view of the glittering Thames.

Walking along Coventry Street on this bright June morning, Lucy found it difficult to believe that she had been so many thousands of miles away from London for six years, or that it was actually twelve years since Terence had entered her life. London might have changed superficially. Familiar buildings had vanished.

Unfamiliar buildings had taken their places. Yet it was still the same London, and to be walking along Coventry Street like this, with the familiar smell rising from the sunny pavement and in her ears the familiar noise recognizable as peculiarly of London in spite of the increase of motor traffic was to her what walking again by the sea is to an exile of years in the heart of a continent. There was hardly a flagstone between Piccadilly and Leicester Square which, had she lingered upon it, would not have reconjured some episode of her girlhood. It was sad not to see familiar shops and cafés, and here and there to find that whole blocks had disappeared; but the pavement was the pavement of her youth. When she came out of the Tube station this morning she had wandered round by the back of the Orient and had felt tempted to walk up the court to see if George the stage-door keeper was still in his little box, with its initialled rack for letters, its telephone and sliding-window. Were he there, he might take her up to Room 45 which in this retrospective mood she would have liked to behold again. He would be able to tell her something of what had happened to the various girls. Revue was apparently still going strong at the Orient. Were any of the old lot in it? And then she had refrained from looking up George in case he should fancy she was trying to show herself off to him as a success in the world. If she had seen him standing out in the court with his pipe she might have waved to him and chanced his recognizing her, but a deliberate visit would look too much like swank.

So she had strolled back into Piccadilly with the intention of visiting the shop-windows of Russell's and Stagg and Mantle's, not with the intention of recalling the days when she had so often gazed into these windows without the slightest idea of being able to afford one of the costumes on show, but with the idea that she would

most likely find something smart and economical at one or other of the shops.

"I wonder if skirts are going much higher," she pondered. "Well, if they are, I don't mind. It won't be the first time my legs have been on exhibition."

A male lounger who had been watching Lucy's contemplation of the shop-windows for some minutes drew near and, looking down at her over his shoulder, asked her in a tone that denoted long practice in the technique of hunting women if she was looking for a pretty frock.

Lucy turned and eyed him coldly from under uplifted brows.

"Well, I'm certainly not looking for *you*," she told him.

"Now don't be a rude little girl. I like pretty little girls like you," the stranger persisted.

"You lost your glasses, didn't you, when you fell off the dustman's cart this morning? Come on, buzz off, and don't annoy me," she concluded, turning away scornfully, and as she turned catching sight further along the window of Miss Chibbett, shrunk even from her excessive thinness of twelve years ago, but unmistakably Miss Chibbett.

"Chibbs!" she cried.

Miss Chibbett drew back from her study of the models in the window and looked nervously round.

"Chibbs! Don't you recognize me?"

"Lucy Arnold! Well, I never . . . well, reelly, what a surprise, and yet not so much of a surprise reelly, because as I was walking down Charing Cross Road not ten minutes back I met a man with a wooden leg and then right on top of him . . . well, you know what I mean, just after him . . . an empty hearse. Well, I said if I shan't have a pleasant surprise before the day's out . . . because either a man with a wooden leg if you see him

coming towards you or a empty hearse will bring you a pleasant surprise . . . but this is a pleasant surprise with a vengeance, as they say. Well, it's years and years since we met, though I heard you was married and married well. 'And she deserves it,' I said, 'because Lucy Arnold, even if she'd often have a game with me, did pay every penny of what she owed, and which is more than I could say of some girls.' Oh yes, I heard all about you, dearie. But the last thing I heard was you'd gone off to Australia and after that nobody seemed to know what had become of you. And you haven't changed a bit. Not a bit you haven't changed. I'd have known you in a moment anywhere. Is that a gentleman friend of yours, dear . . . or perhaps it's your husband . . . oh dear, I do beg pardon if it is. . . ."

Lucy turned to the man who had just accosted her.

"I told you to buzz off," she said angrily. "If you don't go away, I'll give you in charge for a nuisance."

"What a rude little girl," muttered the rebuffed suitor, smiling inane embarrassment as he sheered off.

"Well, reelly, fancy!" exclaimed Miss Chibbett in a shocked voice. "Accosting you, of course." She clicked her tongue. "Dreadful, isn't it? What men will do. Of course they don't pester me nowadays, but when I was younger I had one or two very nasty experiences. Very nasty indeed."

"Did you hear him call me a rude little girl? Me a massive woman of thirty-two with three kids?"

"Well, reelly you know, Lucy . . . or perhaps I ought to say Mrs. Manning. . . . I think that's correct, isn't it, dear . . . I have usually such a very good memory for names. . . ."

"Did you call me Miss Arnold before I was married?"

"No, dear, of course not, but . . ."

"Then what's the matter with Lucy now?"

“Well, I declare you haven’t changed a bit inside or outside. You don’t look a day older. You don’t reelly. And such a bright sunny day. Well, I think you’re wonderful, Lucy, and it was very nice of you to call out to me like that. People you’ve known in the old days are sometimes apt to pass you by as you grow older. Of course, I’m still working. Oh yes, I still get around with my bits and pieces. But business isn’t what it was before the war. It was the ballets kept me going. It’s not the same with these revue girls. And I daresay I don’t buy my stuff so cleverly as what I did once upon a time. And in fact since my dear old mother died . . . fancy, on Armistice Day . . . yes, she died very peacefully, and regularly revelled in the shouting which she could hear in the distance. . . . ‘I like to hear people enjoying themselves, Selina,’ she said to me, and a minute or two after that she was gone—eighty-one years old she was . . . but, as I was saying, since the dear old soul died and after they pulled down Ramilies Place I’ve done more dressmaking myself than actual buying. Well, prices went to such a pitch, and what with giving her a reelly nice funeral and one or two bad debts and having to move to other rooms I reelly had not the ready money to lay out, and you can’t buy without ready money.”

“Where are you living now, Chibbs?”

“Not so *very* far from where we are, dear, though a bit farther than dear old Ramilies Place and Mr. Justican, who passed away last year, and in fact in my opinion he never got over the shock of having to leave Ramilies Place. Yes, I live now in Surrey Street just at the back of King’s Cross. It’s rather a grubby neighbourhood, but very convenient. I get a nice motor bus nowadays down the Caledonian Road and I’m in the West End in a twinkling as you might say.”

“Here, let’s go somewhere and have a glass of sherry,”

Lucy suggested. "And some cake or something. It's a bit early for lunch."

"Oh yes, indeed, much too early, but a nice glass of sherry would be nice, would it not? My dear old mother always liked a glass of sherry in the morning. Thoroughly enjoyed it she did, and Mr. Justican got to know of this somehow, and in that kind way he had he used sometimes to send mother up a whole bottle and she's often passed the remark to me there's nothing like a nice glass of sherry to make the morning go by quickly. She always found the morning the most wearisome time in bed, being a very active woman in her day and used to getting up with the lark as they say, but by the afternoon she seemed always to get more resigned to laying in bed."

"Could we get a good glass of sherry in here?" Lucy asked as they drew near to the Lyons Corner House.

"I don't really know, Lucy, I've never been inside that place, and to be quite candid I'd rather not go in if you don't mind, because it's built over just where we used to live and it would give me rather a creepy feeling. I should feel I might be sitting right on top of where mother died. I'm so very sensitive always to the unseen. I still read the cards sometimes, oh yes . . . well, do you know, I've come to the conclusion it helps business . . . a customer calls and you read the cards for them and perhaps the hearts and diamonds and pictures come out well that afternoon . . . plenty of money and men, because that's what most girls like to see best . . . and then before you know where you are you'll get an order for a coat and skirt. Yes, and what's more, people hear you're good at the cards, and that brings them round out of mere curiosity."

Presently they found a quiet place where various females were nibbling biscuits at small marble-topped tables and sipping glasses of sherry or port.

"Now this is going to make me talkative," Miss

Chibbett declared after her first sip. "I've often asked myself why a glass or two of sherry or a nip of gin or even a Guinness will make anyone talk. I'm very enquiring that way, and my old Pa was the same. It run him in for two guineas and costs once for pulling the communication cord in a train. He said he'd watched this affair over his head so often that at last he couldn't help it, he simply had to see whether the train reelly would stop if he pulled it. And it stopped right enough. 'Idle curiosity' the magistrate called it. And he gave poor Pa quite a lecture about it. But Pa didn't worry his head what the magistrate said. He was always a very easy-going man was Pa."

"I suppose you don't ever see any of the girls who used to be in Room 45?" Lucy asked. Girls indeed! She was the youngest of them, and she was thirty-two.

"Well, let me think. Yes, I saw Ireen Dale and her sister Winnie only last week."

Miss Chibbett shook her head sadly.

"You wouldn't believe what monsters they've grown. To look at them you couldn't believe they'd ever been in the ballet. Of course, Winnie was beginning to get fat even when you knew her, but Ireen who was in the first line of boys when the ballet stopped, well, she's almost the fattest of the two now. They went in for munition work during the war and did quite well, but they was always terrors for the drink. And their father and mother was just as bad. In fact they were a queer family altogether. Very queer. They had a house in Camden Town, and sold it just after the ballet closed down and then they went to live in a flat near Drury Lane. And as far as I could hear they drank very hard with this money they got, and if the war hadn't come along and put them into munitions I think they'd have gone down hill a good bit quicker than what they did. Anyway, they moved back into Camden Town, though just where

I couldn't tell you right off, but I know Ireen and Winnie are both working in a jam factory . . . or is it pickles? no, I'm pretty sure it's jam . . . somewhere beyond Finsbury Park. I didn't speak to them, and I don't think either of them recognized me . . . they were just turning into a public house. It's sad to see a couple of pretty girls come down in the world like that. And yet some of them as go down are nicer than them as go up. Look at Margery Seymour now. Believe it or not, Lucy Arnold . . . oh dear, you carry anyone back so, Lucy. I could fancy I was talking to you in the dressing-room here and now . . . well, as I was saying, believe it or not, but I met Margery Seymour in Shaftesbury Avenue about six months after mother died and I was just on the point of saying, 'well, if it isn't Margery' when she looked straight through me. Straight through me she looked. I might have been a sheet of plate glass the way she looked through me. And then she walked on without so much as a passing nod. Well, I think she might have nodded even if she didn't want to renew old acquaintance, as they say. But it hurt me for a girl who I'd always treated fairly to go and do a thing like that. She was very daintily dressed too. Quite the lady in fact."

"She always was a bloody lady," Lucy observed.

Miss Chibbett clapped her hands with delight at hearing Lucy speak as if she were still one of the first line of boys in Room 45. And so thin were those hands that, although she clapped vigorously, the sound was hardly louder than if two dead leaves had brushed one another in a light summer breeze.

"Oh well, you haven't changed, Lucy, well, really it's so refreshing to hear anyone speak their mind right out like that. But you said nothing except the truth. She was always stuck up. Did you ever see her mother?"

"I saw her once or twice, but I never spoke to her. What was she really?"

"I don't think anyone really knew," Miss Chibbett replied, wriggling with mystery in that prosaic little haunt for females who preferred two glasses of port or sherry and a biscuit to a more substantial lunch. "She was a kept woman, of course. Oh, there's no doubt of that. But who was the father of her two children, that nobody knows. His name wasn't Seymour, that's one sure thing. My own belief is he was a boxer."

"You only think that because Margery's brother was a boxer."

"Yes, but what put it into Mrs. Seymour's head ever to make him a boxer? She had her reasons. She knew she could get him on as indeed she did. And another thing, look at the size of Margery and her brother Jack. Now Mrs. Seymour was a big made woman. So their father must have been on the small side, and which all goes to point to him being one of these small boxers. I reckon fifty years ago Mrs. Seymour was one of those regular-dashing grand-style gay spankers. Did you ever read the life of Cora Pearl? Well, that's my idea of Mrs. Seymour once upon a time. I reckon she'd had to do with a lot of swells in her day. And I think it was being intimate with swells in a certain way what gave her the idea to be such a lady herself."

"She managed to marry off Margery all right. Margery came round to see me when I was living with Terence's people during the war, and Grandmamma took quite a fancy to her; but I didn't keep up with her. What was the name of the man she married? Brown Something or other."

"Orchardson-Browne. He's in a book called *Who's Who*," Miss Chibbett proclaimed with a hint of reverence.

"Is he? Well, he won't ever be in *What's What*,

after marrying Margery. Or being married to her, I should say. But *who* is he then?"

"Geoffrey Orchardson-Browne. Somebody told me he was in this book called *Who's Who*, and I went to a public library to see for myself. I think he must have done well in the war. He had some letters after his name. . . ."

"P.T.O. I should think," Lucy scoffed.

"Something like that . . . and they live in Hampshire. I made a note of the place. I've got it at home in a scrapbook I stick things into. It's quite good company a scrapbook when you spend as much time alone as I do. You can always read something that has interested you and think about it."

"Look here, Chibbs, finish up that sherry and then we'll go and have lunch somewhere."

"Oh, but Lucy, I'm not dressed to go out anywhere to lunch with you," Miss Chibbett protested in a flutter of excitement.

"Shut up," Lucy jeered.

Moreover, she insisted on taking her guest to the Trocadero.

"Well, reelly life can be very gay," Miss Chibbett declared, looking round at the crowded restaurant and listening in amazement to the music and chatter round her. "Well, reelly I never had such a treat as this in my life. If only poor mother could have been alive what an adventure to tell her! She always enjoyed hearing about the theatres I visited, but I never got a chance to tell her about anything like this."

Lucy pressed her to go on talking about the girls of twelve years ago, but Miss Chibbett was too much dazed by the clatter and chatter of the room and by the attention of the waiter to concentrate upon tales.

"Oh, not any more wine, please, Lucy. You must remember I shall have to walk out past all these tables

and chairs, and my head's already going round at such a pace that if I drink another drop I shall *never* find my way out. And I don't want to disgrace you, Lucy, after all your kindness. Well, I shall certainly never forget the morning I saw an empty hearse right on top of a wooden-legged man both coming towards me. A pleasant surprise indeed! And when I heard your voice! 'Chibbs,' you called out just like that. And you looked so young. Not changed a bit. And that very invigorating sherry. And now all this luxury. Well, I've often sighed for the old days before the war, but I never had such a day as this."

"Do you think you could make me two smart skirts if I sent for the stuff?" Lucy asked abruptly.

"No, no, Lucy. You've gone beyond anything I could do now. You're just the same, dearie, as what you always was. Not a day older. But you've gone beyond me and my poor bits and pieces. It would be silly to pretend anything else. It's kind of you to think of it, but I wouldn't impose on you."

"Quite simple skirts," Lucy insisted. "Anyway, you can take my measurements if I come round to your place after lunch."

"Oh, but you heard what I said. Such a grubby place. I won't say it's not convenient . . . and if it's raining I can always get the Piccadilly Tube at York Road . . . but it's not an agreeable neighbourhood."

"I wasn't born in London, was I? I didn't live in London till I was twenty-five, did I? I don't talk like London and look like London and think like London, do I? Oh no, it's only a rumour."

"Yes, indeed, I was forgetting," Miss Chibbett admitted. "Reelly I'm in such a dither with so much excitement that I'll forget my own name in a minute."

Surrey Street is one of the small muddy tributaries of

Caledonian Road which enter that melancholy thoroughfare soon after it flows northward beyond King's Cross. No part of London displays within such a comparatively restricted area such a varied assortment of the horrors of industrialism. The three great railway termini of Euston, St. Pancras, and King's Cross defile the atmosphere, of which the third and nearest to Surrey Street offers the most cynical affront to beauty and decency. Immense gasometers thrust their bloated shapes skywards. A squalid accumulation of canal water is spread out nearby like a monstrous puddle. The air often resounds to the terrified bellowing of cattle being driven to the great slaughterhouses from the cattle market, where beside cattle is sold the heterogeneous rubbish of a swarming city. Nor does this end the catalogue. Close at hand rises the bleak soulless mass of Pentonville Gaol, and the female prison of Holloway, that preposterous baronial hall, is scarcely half a mile beyond.

The houses of Surrey Street are built of those ochreous bricks which were for so many years a favourite expression of the Victorian zest for ugliness, for being as they were extremely susceptible of the dirt and grime of a great city they became almost immediately the outward visible sign of the inward spiritual disgrace that infected the mind of man. It is but fair to add that these begrimed brownish houses became with time less offensive than the jerry-built red brick which succeeded them.

Miss Chibbett's landlord was a plumber whose name, Abraham Lightheart, must have soured his disposition early in life, for he was as morose a man as might be met and moved with that heavy deliberate motion which is a characteristic of those who spend most of their time manipulating lead.

"Fortunately, though," Miss Chibbett told Lucy, "I've never yet been behindhand with my weekly account, and so I've never had occasion to argue with Mr. Light-

heart, or Mrs. Lightheart who is not a woman I should ever what you might call make a friend of, but who I will say excepting on a Saturday night when she seems to let her aggravation with Mr. Lightheart get the better of her and sometimes throws things at him . . . yes, I'm bound to say excepting for that I've always found her very pleasant. And if ever she's had to open the door to any of my customers who I haven't seen coming when I've been sitting sewing in the window, she's never grumbled about it. And when you live alone like me you get very sensitive over anybody grumbling at you. It makes you feel a regular nuisance being still alive at all. And now, dear, if you won't mind waiting two-two's, I'll just pop into my bedroom and pop off my outdoor things and then we can look at one or two plates and you can let me know which style you fancy. And the way the skirts are going up! Oh no, reelly, Lucy, I didn't mean it in that way. Oh well, reelly. . . ."

Miss Chibbett fluttered from the sitting-room in a rapture of shocked propriety, and Lucy, after a glance from the window to see that her taxi was duly waiting, for she did not want to be the cynosure of the district while waiting for a motor-bus in the Caledonian Road, looked round at Miss Chibbett's room, the most conspicuous feature of which was a pair of dressmaker's dummies that stood facing one another in a corner, engaged it would seem in exchanging perpetual confidences. Both dummies showed that scorn of fashion's volatility by retaining the swelling busts and hour-glass waists of the date at which they were made. And both dummies, notwithstanding their upper parts being covered with shiny black linen and their lower parts being made of wire, gave the impression of possessing a richer femininity than the shrivelled little dressmaker to whose service they were bound.

Lucy shook her head at the dummies and turned over

a heap of fashion plates on a whatnot. They were dated 1925; but they seemed to bear no relation to contemporary existence and the shortness of the skirts they depicted had somewhat the effect of attempts at impropriety by an illustrated paper toward the close of the Victorian era. Lucy left the fashion plates, and from a small pedestal table the black papier mâché top of which, inlaid with flowers and butterflies of mother o' pearl, could be used as a firescreen were the blaze ever fierce enough in Miss Chibbett's grate, she picked up what was no doubt the scrap-book mentioned at the Trocadero. The first thing she read was a newspaper cutting from a Manchester paper dated January 11th of the current year:

FATAL TRAM ACCIDENT TO ACTRESS AT BLACKFORD

On Thursday last, January 8th, Miss Maud Chapman, an actress, crossing High Street, Blackford, slipped and fell in front of a municipal tram. The driver immediately applied his brakes, but he was not in time to avert a fatal accident. It is believed that death was instantaneous. The deceased was a member of the chorus of the touring company of the popular pantomime *Aladdin*, which has been drawing big houses at the Theatre Royal, Blackford, during the present holiday season. The death of Miss Chapman, who was on her way to the theatre at the time of the accident, cast a gloom over her fellow artistes with whom she was very popular.

So one of the first line of boys was gone. How old would Maudie Chapman have been? Forty, at least, and probably a year or two older.

"I didn't know Maudie Chapman was dead," Lucy said to Miss Chibbett when she came back into the sitting-room.

"Oh, you've been looking at my scrap-book . . . yes, poor girl . . . and yet perhaps it was for the best . . . the newspaper was sent me by a girl in the company, and of course I cut it out and pasted it into my scrap-book. I daresay it's all that's left to say there ever was such a girl as Maudie Chapman. Of course you'll remember when her little girl died of the scarlet fever. It happened before the Orient ballet finished. Well, she was never the same again after that, Maudie wasn't. She and her husband had rooms in Pimlico, and after her little girl died I'm afraid Maudie started to . . . well, it's best to speak right out . . . she started to drink. And from what I used to hear at the time her husband . . . he was a taxi-driver if you remember, Walter Rowell by name . . . well, he seems to have taken up with another girl just after the child died, and in fact I heard he actually met this girl at a party in Kilburn where he went to spend the Saturday and Sunday while they was fumigating the rooms in Alverton Street. That may or may not be true, but it's the way I was told the story. I suppose Maudie took it so hard about the loss of her little Ivy that it got on her husband's nerves. Men haven't much patience if a woman goes on *too* long. I think it was the way he used to go off out of an evening that made Maudie try for an engagement in the revue in spite of her not being the best of friends with Madge Wilson, but she never could suit her style to the chorus of revue, and it ended in her getting the push before even the first night. Well, of course that sent her to the bottle worse than ever, and it ended in Walter Rowell walking out on her and going off to live with this other girl. Maudie herself seemed able to get engagements on tour, but from what I always heard she was very free with herself . . . you know, men found her easy, and they weren't the kind of men one likes to think about . . . still somehow or other she kept going . . . and as you read in that bit

I cut out of the paper she was actually in an engagement when she was killed . . . the girl who sent me the paper, Gertie Graves was her name . . . I don't suppose you ever knew her . . . she was at Drury Lane for the panto, and which is where I got to know her . . . well, Gertie wrote me she was afraid there reelly was no doubt Maudie was one or two over the eight when she tripped over the tramline, but I'm glad to say the inquest didn't say nothing about that. The members of the company subscribed and bought her a grave in the cemetery, because Maudie seemed to have no relations, and her husband had gone off to South Africa so if it hadn't have been for the company she'd have laid in a pauper's grave. That's one thing in the profession, they can say what they like about pros, but they'll help anyone who's down *if* they can. Yes, it was only the beginning of this year poor Maudie went, and she couldn't have been a day under forty-two . . . but in spite of the drink and the racketey way she carried on she was in an engagement when she was took. Still, you can't call it getting the best out of her life. And she was a good dancer. She knew her twiddly-bits to rights. And she was a jolly girl. You don't remember Jenny Pearl, but Jenny Pearl has said to me many a time that if she wanted to go out round the houses . . . you know, and have a reelly good laugh at everybody and everything there wasn't any girl she'd have picked on sooner for a companion than Maudie Chapman, excepting of course her great friend Ireen Dale. And I've often thought, sitting here by myself and thinking a lot like what I do, what a strange thing for Maudie and Ireen both to take to drink the way they did, and for Jenny and Maudie both to find sudden death the way they did. Well, there's fate for you, and when you think how your fate's written either in the cards or in the hand or in the stars or in the tea-cups or in dreams and some say in the bumps on your head, though I don't believe that

myself, well, it makes you feel a bit funny inside if you're like me and see the future before it's arrived."

"I ought to think myself jolly lucky," Lucy said pensively. "Come on, Chibbs, what about getting my measurements?"

"Now you know, Lucy, what is the use in you pretending to me that you reelly want me to make you a couple of skirts? It's just being kind. Well, you've given me a lovely time, dear, and which I won't forget . . . oh, and that reminds me . . . I hope I didn't do wrong, but I brought away the menew card of that lovely lunch at the Trocadero to stick in my scrapbook. I saw it was dated. So they couldn't use it again hardly, and I didn't think the management would mind. Well, anytime now I pass the Trocadero and see the people going in and coming out I shall think to myself, 'Yes, and I know what you're going to eat or what you have ate,' because I've often asked myself what kind of things people do eat in a place like that. But as I was saying, Lucy, there's no need for you to think you're called upon to do anything more for me than what you have done already, and which you weren't called upon to do in any case if it comes to that. So don't let's have any pretending about these skirts."

"You can make me two skirts for when we go to the seaside in August. Something I can wear on the beach when I'm lazing in the sun, if we get any sun, that is. We go to a very quiet place at the end of nowhere. If you can cut anything out for those two massive women in the corner, you can surely fit me, for I'm nothing but skin and grief these days."

"You're looking at my poor old dummies. Well, I'll be frank with you, Lucy, and admit that reelly they are no manner of use to me nowadays. If a woman's got anything of a chest nowadays she tries to hide it . . . and hips! Well, hips don't exist any more. But I don't like

to part with my old dummies. You know: they've lived with me so long that they're become reelly half-human, and they are undoubtedly company of a sort when I'm sitting here by myself—especially of a foggy Sunday evening when you hear them bells ding-donging all round. It's not surprising reelly that such a lot of people do go to church. Many's the time I've neelly been driven there myself. Only you feel so out of it if you're a stranger. You try to squeeze yourself in a pew, and people move along the same as what they do in a crowded railway-carriage absolutely bent on making you feel awkward and uncomfortable."

Lucy's conscience over keeping the taxi all this time was roused by this last remark.

"Look here, Chibbs, if you'll promise to walk with me as far as the nearest Piccadilly Tube station I'll send the taxi away, and then you can tell me some more about the girls in the dressing-room. You can give me a cup of tea, can't you?"

"Oh yes . . . oh, Lucy, I should enjoy that . . . but I'm afraid I haven't any cakes."

"That's all right. We ate enough at lunch to keep us alive for an hour or two."

"Indeed, yes, you may well say we ate enough. And more than enough. In fact I came as near gormandizing as I ever came. Unpleasant as indigestion is I often think it's a blessing in disguise, for it does keep one from craving too much after rich food."

The taxi was dismissed. The measurements were made. The cut of the skirts was settled. Miss Chibbett put the kettle on the gas-ring, and busied herself with the cups and saucers.

"There's always something particularly nice," she observed, "about a nice early cup of tea. I don't believe in waiting too long for your afternoon cup of tea."

"What became of Madge Wilson?" Lucy asked presently.

"Well, nobody knows exactly where she is now. You heard, I suppose, that after she'd been in two productions at the Orient the management as good as told her Bertold he was pushing her on to them?"

"I've heard nothing. I saw she wasn't at the Orient any longer, and so I guessed she'd got chucked out. Well, I'm not surprised. She could dance a little, though it was mostly faked. But she had a voice like a bent penny-whistle when she tried to sing, and she was a terrible stick at acting. Rita Vitali and I went and saw her on the first night of that revue which came after our last ballet, and we couldn't think why the gallery didn't give her the bird. Well, we couldn't hear her hardly in the stalls; but up in the gallery she must have sounded no more than an escape of gas, or a draught under the door."

"Well, the management gave her the sack, and I think that Bertold of hers got a bit aggravated about it. But whether he made Madge think he was going to take up with another girl, or whether she just got tired of being at his beck and call the way she always was, or whether she at last met a fellow she really loved I don't know. All I do know is that soon after the war began she went off to America with a fellow called Syd Hurley who was doing a wild west act round the halls. Lassoing and throwing knives and shooting apples off the tops of people's heads. You know the kind of turn."

"I remember Syd Hurley very well," said Lucy. "I remember one night at the Variety Artists' Club in Lisle Street he emptied a jug of coffee down some dago's neck, and there was very nearly a bad fight. He was a tall fair fellow with curly hair and rather good-looking. Fancy, and Madge Wilson went off with him? Is she still with him?"

"Oh no, they parted company a year or two later, and

the last I heard of Madge was from a girl I knew who was touring in South Africa and met her with some fellow who was taking her with him for some film he was making. I used to go and see her mother sometimes in the New Kent Road, but she was always very off-handed, and after Madge left Krebs she was more off-handed than ever. I heard he owned the shop and everything in it, but if he did he left Madge's mother where she was. Still, it's ten years since I saw her, and for all I know she may be dead and gone by now. If I'd only known I was going to have this pleasant surprise this morning I'd have tried to find out something about her."

"And Rita Vitali? Has she still got that dancing-school?"

"Not where she was in Soho Square. She made quite a success of it, but five years ago she married again. . . ."

"Did her Edward die then?"

"Oh yes, he died the last year of the war just about two months before my dear old mother went. And Rita married another Frenchman. I suppose she'd have felt strange with anybody excepting a Frenchman. This second husband was a singer. Fairly well known, I fancy. And then she went to live in Paris and started a dancing school there, and which I hear is very successful. What a lovely girl she was, and, you know, she never lost her looks. She was thirty-seven when her first husband died. That would make her thirty-nine when she married again. She asked me to the wedding. It was Roman Catholic of course, but very quiet. In fact just as quiet as a wedding in the Church of England. I'd expected . . . well, I don't really know what I did expect, but I think there's a lot of exaggeration about Roman Catholics, and I've always made a point of saying so ever since. Well, you'd have been surprised, Lucy, if you could have seen her. She looked lovely—really lovely. She was always very nice to me. You know;

she'd go out of her way if she thought the girls were mocking me to say something pleasant and make me feel they didn't mean it. And her two little girls. Pictures! They grew up regular pictures. Goodness me, they'll be getting on for nineteen years old now. There's nothing like children for teaching you the way time flies. They were just about fourteen when Rita married again. Pictures! I never saw two more lovely children, and you couldn't tell one from the other. Lovely little dancers too, they were. I haven't heard anything of Rita for over a year now; but I'll be meeting some girl just back from Paris sooner or later, and I'll be bound to get some news of Rita again. She was always very kind to English girls who were over dancing at the Paris theatres. You know, always asked them to come and see her and tried to make them feel at home. I missed her very much when she left England. But I've got her address in my scrapbook, and I'll write her, I think, and tell her about this pleasant surprise and say you and me was talking about her."

"Yes, give her my love and say I'll come and see her if I'm ever in Paris. You're quite right. She was a lovely girl."

The two of them sat silent for a few minutes, thinking of Rita, of her deep lustrous eyes and oval ivory face, of her black hair parted smoothly in the style of a ballerina of long ago, of her exquisitely rounded lissom figure and her perfect legs, and of the grace of her dancing which should have but somehow never did carry her beyond the first line of boys.

"Did you ever hear what became of Queenie Danvers?" Lucy asked presently. "The last time I heard of her she was doing war work."

"Oh, what a . . . oh, well, Lucy, you know, I can't hardly trust myself to speak about Queenie Danvers even now . . . perhaps you never heard she went away from

the Orient owing me fifteen shillings . . . oh, but of course you would have, because you was still there, wasn't you, when the thefts came out . . . fifteen shillings for a double-breasted light check coat . . . well, what a loss for me, because I let her have it extra cheap, reelly just out of kindness because she always went about so badly dressed . . . still, there you are, a girl who'd pinch another girl's bits of jewellery and money wasn't going to think twice of owing me fifteen shillings on a coat. War work! Well, it doesn't say much for any war that wants a girl like Queenie Danvers to work for it, that's very certain. And what were the work she done, Lucy?"

The idea of Queenie Danvers had thrown Miss Chibbett into a state of such indignation that her grammar never perfectly safe collapsed completely, and after asking that question she sat quivering in her chair like the broken mainspring of a gramophone.

"Don't ask me what she did," said Lucy. "Don't ask me what anybody did in the war, because the better they did it the longer they made the war."

"Well, my belief is Queenie Danvers was a spy," Miss Chibbett declared.

"Then you woke up," Lucy commented contemptuously. "Don't be silly, Chibbs. What was Queenie Danvers going to spy on?"

"She was working in some government office."

"Yes, banging a typewriter and pushing a pencil like thousands of others. You might as well think my young sister Margaret was a spy."

"But your sister wasn't going round the West End after the war dressed up smarter than ever Gaby Deslys was."

"Queenie Danvers dressed smartly? She may have pulled the contents of a counter down on top of herself, but that wouldn't make her smart."

"Yes, of course she was very overdressed," Miss Chibbett agreed. "But she was wearing clothes that cost a great deal of money. And where did the money come from?"

"She probably got some fellow in tow. Everybody went mad during the war, and what was to stop one lunatic thinking Queenie Danvers was the winner of a beauty competition?"

Miss Chibbett shook her head.

"She didn't have any one particular fellow, but she was in with a flashy crowd of fellows who were raided for a gambling den they had in Dean Street, Soho, and she was charged along with them and paid a big fine."

"That doesn't make her out a spy."

"No, but a year after that one of the officers she worked with shot himself, and it was common talk he'd been blackmailed by Queenie, though there wasn't enough evidence to charge her."

"And that doesn't make her out a spy. More likely the fellow she blackmailed was a spy."

"That's just it," Miss Chibbett went on breathlessly. "That's just what I've always thought. But he couldn't have done anything unless Queenie was in with him. Anyway, she was brought up for demanding money with menaces from an old gentleman where she went to work as a secretary and got eighteen months. Mr. X they called him all through the case, and it was never really reported because it wasn't fit to print, they said. And where do you think she is now?" Miss Chibbett concluded on the high triumphant note of a mosquito which has found its way into the net.

"Bedlam, I should say."

"No, Holloway. Yes, she's at Holloway at this moment for shoplifting. I knew she'd come to that finally, when she went off owing me fifteen shillings for that double-breasted light check coat."

"She *is* the bad girl of the family, isn't she?" said Lucy.

"Bad? Queenie Danvers is bad through and through. And we've only heard about what was found out, as you might say. Think of all the things she must have done without being found out. There's only one thing that can be said for her and which is that her mother was bad before her and she never had no proper upbringing. And I daresay her father being killed in an air raid may have given her a nasty shock."

"Killed in an air raid?"

"Yes, he was a bit of an invalid, you know, and when the signal came to take cover he was too slow by what I heard and he was hit by a piece of a house walking along the pavement. And I've often thought, if Queenie Danvers reelly was a spy signalling to Zeppelins and all that, what she must have felt to think she'd killed her own father, in a manner of speaking. It must have preyed on her a lot. I was talking to Gladys West only last week about her being in prison for shoplifting, and she told me the Baron was sure she was a spy."

"The Baron isn't still with Gladys West?" Lucy exclaimed in astonishment.

"Just the same, my dear. Just the very same as ever. Gladys is in the chorus of that new revue at the Frivolity, and every night as regular as clockwork the Baron meets her by the stage-door just off Maiden Lane, and they walk down into the Strand and get on a motor-bus at Charing Cross to go back to Kensington. And Gladys is a good thirty-six if not thirty-seven now, but her figure is as slight as yours and she keeps wonderfully young in the face. I daresay it's the life she leads. Well, you might say there's been no change in it for not far off twenty years. If I said she took up with the Baron about 1907 I wouldn't be far out. And her mother still goes on, though Gladys says she's been getting a bit

slow in her movements lately. Well, Mrs. West must be over seventy now, and I daresay she feels that lame leg of hers a bit more nowadays, though she hasn't put on much weight. Well, I often think that the lean ones are best off in this world. I think it tells on a woman when she gets old and has to carry about with her three times as much flesh as when she was younger. Look at me. Sixty-two, dearie. And what do you think the bus-conductor said to me the other morning when I jumped on just after it had started and he caught hold of my arm to help me up? He said, 'Well, I declare, mum,' he said, 'if you aren't as light and lively as a cock-sparrow.' Of course, he's quite an old friend of mine, this particular conductor, because his bus passes the corner of Surrey Street just at the time on Tuesdays and Fridays I make my little morning visits to the West End to see the latest models in the shops. In the evenings I go round to the theatres, and which I don't do nearly so often as in the sweet once upon a time. I usually reckon to take the Tube at York Road unless it's a reelly lovely night, and then I like to go on the top of a bus and get a good blow. But goodness, how I have been chattering! Talk about a tin can tied to a dog's tail, it's nothing to the way my tongue's been wagging. And now what about a fitting for the skirts, Lucy? I haven't got a great deal of work on hand just at the moment. People don't seem able to make up their minds about the weather, and the summer orders have been slow—very slow. So any time reelly will suit me, once I get the material you choose, and which I ought to get by Monday next at the latest . . . yes, I ought to get it by then. . . ."

Lucy detected a faint hesitation, and divined at once that Miss Chibbett was considering the problem of paying cash for the material, perhaps a difficult one.

"You'd better let me pay in advance for the material," she suggested.

Miss Chibbett fluttered.

"Oh, but is that quite . . . I mean you'd never do that if you went to a fashionable dressmaker . . . and suppose I make a bungle of the skirts . . . so unbusiness-like to pay for material in advance."

Lucy put down three notes.

"I kept *you* waiting often enough in the sweet once upon a time," she reminded Miss Chibbett. "And perhaps you'll like to come and fit me in my house?" she went on in order by introducing a fresh excitement to dispose of any more breathless protests.

"Oh, indeed I should . . . oh, well, isn't that . . . your new house in Chelsea. . . . I haven't been to Chelsea not since I was a little girl and went to see a great-uncle of Pa's who was a Pensioner in the Royal Hospital . . . over fifty years ago, yes, a veteran of Waterloo . . . Sergeant Chibbett of the Fusiliers . . . he had such a heavy white beard and moustache and no teeth and I couldn't make out a word he said, and he was so deaf he couldn't make out a word Pa said either, and I don't really think he ever properly knew who we were. Pa took him half a pound of tobacco and I took him a kettle-holder I'd worked with 'A Present from Selina for Uncle Peter,' but I overran my space and it came out Uncle Pete and Pa said anyone would think it was a nigger minstrel instead of a sergeant in the Fusiliers who'd fought under the Duke of Wellington, but it didn't matter because Uncle Peter thought it was a handkerchief and blew his nose on it . . . and I haven't been to Chelsea since. . . . Oh well, really life seems full of excitement nowadays. Now I wonder which number bus I ought to take . . . never mind, my friend the conductor will be sure to know."

"I'll stand you a taxi from King's Cross," said Lucy. "And tell the man to drive right down to the Embankment by Blackfriars Bridge. If it's a fine day next

Wednesday you can have the hood down, and you'll go all the way along the river. Only, don't get blown across the river right out of the taxi, Chibbs, and land on top of the Elephant and Castle or the Horns at Kennington, because you don't weigh more than two specks of dust and a canary's feather."

"Oh but, Lucy . . ."

"Oh but, Chibbs, if you don't come in a taxi I'll tell the maid not to let you in. And now you've got to walk with me as far as the Tube station, because I *don't* want to be stared at, walking alone."

CHAPTER NINE

LUCY ARNOLD

LUCY was forty. She had just decided after an extremely thorough and an extremely critical examination of herself in the triple toilet-glass of her bedroom that she did not look it. For this agreeable state of affairs she could thank first her own vitality, secondly the care she had taken of her appearance without indulging in that exaggerated care which made a woman a slave to her appearance, thirdly the many years of unbroken happiness she had enjoyed, and last but not least the resolution she had taken when she married Terence Manning not to change her essential self in order to produce a false self designed to fit better the changed conditions and circumstances marriage must bring her.

“My father may sell plums in his shop, but that doesn’t say I’ve got to walk about with them in my mouth,” she had once in very early days told Lady Emily, who had been suggesting, she hoped tactfully, that her daughter-in-law should amuse herself during her son’s absence at the front by taking elocution lessons. That had been ages ago, before Lucius was born, and Lucius was now seventeen and a half and in his last year but one at Rugby. Yet although the time which had passed since that dim anxious autumn at Prince’s Gate had seen Lucius grow from an unborn child to what his jovial old grandfather called a very fine imitation of himself at the same age, although it had taken Terence and herself across to Australia for several years and brought them back again, although it had given them Joan and Margaret, who could hardly be called little girls any longer,

although it had presented her with a car and the necessary practice to drive that car with complete self-possession, although it had taken most of the colour out of those powder-blue velvet curtains in her sitting-room, and although photographs of herself and Terence even half-way back through that time looked now absurdly old-fashioned, that time itself had glided by as unobtrusively as the reflected ripples of the Thames upon the ceiling of her room. If her life were divided into two halves how immensely longer and if counted by remembered incidents how much fuller seemed the first half. It was incredible that they had already lived for eight years in Cheyne Walk, that it was over eight years since she and Terence had agreed to have the picture of her by that young New South Wales painter hung not in the dining-room as it had been hung in their Sydney house, but over the mantelpiece in Terence's library where it still hung over the grey canvas-paper which they had chosen after so many discussions . . . their Sydney house, with the french-windows opening on the lawn, and the scent of the wattles in that upside-down Australian spring . . . six years they had lived in it. . . . Joan and Margaret had been born in it. . . . Grannie had made two visits there, each of which at the time had seemed to last longer than any visit ever known . . . and now the whole of their life in Sydney seemed to have shrunk to french-windows and a sunny lawn and the fluffy yellow wattles peeped at through the wrong end of a pair of opera-glasses. If the next twenty years were going to glide by at this unnatural pace she should be a wizened old woman before she was aware of it. Joan would be fourteen in October. If Joan got married at twenty-two, the age when she herself had married Terence, she might be a grandmother in less than ten years, and if Joan took it into her head to marry earlier . . . and she was very headstrong, Joan was . . . she might easily be a

grandmother in less time than they had now been living in Cheyne Walk. Lucy caught herself thinking it was time something was done to curb Joan's headstrong disposition. Miss Pettifer was very nice, and she was awfully good-tempered with Joan and Margaret, but she did allow Joan to have her own way too much.

"Mother didn't let *me* do just what *I* liked when I was thirteen. I got a jolly good box on the ears if I didn't look out. Joan needn't think she's going to do just what she likes with me. She needn't think I'm going to have a lot of soppy boys chasing round after her in another year or two, because I jolly well won't."

Lucy grinned at herself suddenly. She was remembering that, in spite of all her mother had said and done, she had had her own way in most things. There had been arguments all the time about coming home in the early hours of the morning, but for something like a couple of years she always had come home in her own time.

"All the same, Joan isn't me," Lucy decided. "And *she's* not going to do it. Cheyne Walk isn't Goldbeater Alley. Besides, if Joan gets married as soon as *she* thinks herself grown up, Margaret will want to copy her. Still, if they do both fall in love . . . really fall in love in the way that Terence and I were in love . . . I'm not going to behave like grannie . . . still, that's not fair, because the poor old soul behaved very well really. It must have been a bit of a shock when her darling Terence suddenly sprung me on her. I think *I* should ring for cold water if Joan was to tell me she'd married a chorus-boy at the Vanity. What? I'd feel inclined to put her across my knee. Still, it isn't likely to happen. She's more likely to get engaged to some young dream with his hair nailed down, and glass eyes, and accordion-pleated trousers."

Yes, Joan who according to Miss Pettifer read just

a bit too much, Mrs. Manning, was probably doomed to an intellectual future, would probably end in a house where you tripped over books and trod on highbrow gramophone records and couldn't find a chair of which the springs weren't broken. Lucius, however, was another matter. Suppose he took it into his head to fall in love while he was still at Cambridge, like his father before him? Suppose he went potty on some chorus-girl with eyelashes like park railings and eyebrows like lines in an exercise-book?

"Oh, I'd tear her eyes out," Lucy declared in a mixture of alarm at the serious possibility of such an event and of amusement at the notion of Lucius, of noisy energetic squash-faced Lucius languishing for the glances of such a siren.

Well, as soon as Lucius left school she'd take good care he spent most of his spare time with his mother, because she reckoned she could teach a boy as much about the world as any young platinum blonde of the contemporary stage. Yet could she? Had she not since she married Terence withdrawn too much into this comfortable easy-going world of well-to-do people in which he had placed her? And was the worldly wisdom of twenty years ago any use to-day? Still, however much people might change in outward ways, they remained just the same inside. But would Lucius believe that? Might he not find his mother old-fashioned, for all her young looks? Perhaps she was taking too much for granted, worse, perhaps she was letting her family take her too much for granted. No wonder time went by so imperceptibly in the regularity of this easy-going existence. Christmas holidays . . . theatres and cinemas and since last Christmas Lucius able to go occasionally to the club and steal from Terence some of his dances with her . . . Lucius back at school . . . Terence playing golf every Saturday and Sunday

... herself driving in her car to see friends of hers and Terence . . . but not friends of hers, not real friends . . . not friends to whom you confided what you really thought and felt . . . she had been more intimate with her enemies at the Orient . . . talks with Miss Pettifer about where Joan and Margaret should go on Saturday afternoons, and ticket-buying for concerts at the Albert Hall after Sunday dinner with grandfather and grannie in Prince's Gate . . . one visit a week to father and mother in Goldbeater Alley . . . sometimes with Joan, sometimes with Margaret, sometimes with both . . . and just because Joan and Margaret enjoyed these visits better than any concert at the Albert Hall a faint dread that they would begin to enjoy them too much? . . . a touch of snobbish fear? . . . all very well for herself to remain Lucy Arnold, but Joan and Margaret had to be quite definitely Joan and Margaret Manning. Easter holidays . . . and Lucius home from Rugby . . . more theatres and cinemas and dances . . . drives into the country by car . . . getting spring clothes . . . and summer clothes . . . the summer holidays . . . bathing and lying in the sun on that beach they had been visiting now for the last eight years . . . it was really a mistake to go to the same place every year . . . a fortnight away by herself with Terence when Lucius had gone back to school . . . and even that fortnight had been to the same place on Lake Como for the last three years . . . autumn clothes . . . the friendliness of London when you came back to it in October . . . winter clothes . . . the Christmas holidays again. . . .

Chibbs used to say sometimes that she ought to make an effort to get into touch with some of her old friends in the days before she was married.

“Really, Lucy, you know I think it would be as much of a pleasure for you to go and rout about sometimes in your old haunts and rout out some of your old friends as

what it is for me to come and sew twice a week at your house like I do."

But she had always refused. The weekly visits of Chibbs had served to provide any links she needed with the past. For three years Chibbs had kept her informed of what was happening in the world which had once been hers. There had been that afternoon when Chibbs had been so full of the news of Gladys West's Baron having left her mother's house in Hornton Place that she had seemed to be actually blown out by it and to have taken on the smoothness of an inflated penny toy. There had been the positive information of Madge Wilson's having been seen in London by a mutual acquaintance and of Madge Wilson's hair being still very pretty but her figure twice the size of what it was. In fact every week there had been gossip about somebody or something retailed while Miss Chibbett sat up in that room at the top of the house which was kept for her and from the windows of which was the finest view of the river in London.

"Oh reelly, Lucy, the sights I can see from here while I'm sewing . . . barges and boats, and the buses going over Battersea Bridge . . . and what they tell me is what makes the wheels go round on all the Tubes where those great chimneys are, and if it should stop working . . . and I do so love that little church opposite . . . Battersea church, they tell me it is . . . reelly quite countrified . . . and the trees of Battersea Park in the distance . . . and the sun and the wind making regular waves . . . and you've got pinks in your little garden . . . well, if my dear old mother could have seen these pinks, for pinks were always her favourite flowers . . . she carried a bunch of pinks the day she married . . . and to-day as I was walking along the Embankment enjoying this lovely July sun some street boys came running after me and said, 'Please to remember the grotto, lady.'

‘Grotto?’ I said, and they showed me a regular little fairyland they’d built out of stones and seaweed and scallop-shells, well, I suppose it shouldn’t really be called seaweed, because river water isn’t salt, is it, but this river weed was just as green as the seaweed I remember I used to find at Margate when Pa took me paddling as a kiddy. And I gave those little boys a penny, and they said, ‘Thank you, lady,’ and went running after some more passers-by for *them* to remember the grotto.”

And Terence had told Miss Chibbett when he came back from the city that afternoon that the grotto had been a-building by the banks of the Thames in July for hundreds of years, and he had told her that the original grotto was somewhere in Spain and Miss Chibbett had said, “Fancy, Mr. Manning! Spain! That always reminds me of a rhyme I used to say when *I* was a tiny tot. ‘Rain, rain, go to Spain, and don’t come here no more ever again.’”

But Miss Chibbett came no more to sew in Cheyne Walk. She had not come for nearly five years. In the winter of 1929, on the Thursday on which she was always expected, Mr. Lighthead, her landlord, had arrived instead to say that Miss Chibbett had been took ill on the previous Monday and that the doctor they had fetched in had said she could never last out the week with the pneumonia into which her cold had turned. And then the plumber had continued with what for him was the most unusual talkativeness, “Begging your pardon, mum, but Miss Chibbett was arsting after you very hard, and this morning she got regular frothed up over not being able to get down to you for her sewing, and Mrs. Lightheart, and which is my wife, said to me, ‘Abe,’ she said, ‘you put on your Sunday hat and suit and go right down to Mrs. Manning’s,’ she said, ‘and arst Mrs. Manning if she could see her way to come along to Surrey Street and have a few words with the poor old girl before she

passes on. It 'ud give her a bit of pleasure and keep her from feeling *too* lonely.' We got a clergyman in to see her, mum; but I don't know, somehow Miss Chibbett seemed to think he was somebody else. In fact she kept calling him George and arsting him if the girls from Room 45 had gone down yet for the second ballet. However, he's a broad-minded kind of clergyman, and he knew me through me having mended a pipe in his sink a month back, and I explained she was barmy with the pneumonia."

She had telephoned for a taxi at once, and offered Mr. Lightheart a lift back to Surrey Street. He had uttered hardly a word throughout the drive, but when they got out he had said, "That's the first time I ever drove in a taxi, mum. Nice handy things, ain't they?"

In the narrow entrance hall of the house in Surrey Street they had been met by Mrs. Lightheart with the news that Miss Chibbett had died about ten minutes before they arrived. "She was quite herself, mum, just before the end, and she said she hoped she'd last till you come, and if she didn't I was to give you her scrap-book, and which I've put in the kitchen wrapped up in yesterday's paper. Would you like to nip up and have a last look at her?"

She had felt a faint dread of doing so, but she had fought it back and gone upstairs to look at Miss Chibbett, who in that dim little bedroom on which the shadows of the winter afternoon were lying heavily had seemed like a piece of crumpled string thrown aside.

"She gave me her dummies," Mrs. Lightheart had said after they left Miss Chibbett's body alone in the twilight, "though what we shall do with them I don't rightly know. Lightheart said we could sell them in the Caledonian Market, but I said, 'No, they may take up a lot of room, but they don't eat nothing, and I'm not

going to do any such a thing as sell what was left in my keeping to look after.'"

And then Lucy herself had caught a bad cold, and Terence who had offered to pay all the expenses of Miss Chibbett's funeral had refused to let her run the risk of catching pneumonia herself by attending. But he had gone himself. There were no relations to notify. A few girls from the theatres had been present; but none of them had been contemporaries of Lucy, so far as Terence had been able to say.

Perhaps if he had recognized any girl . . . though woman was the word now . . . she might have made the effort to renew old acquaintances. As it was she had done nothing. She had had to think about getting a governess for Joan and Margaret. She had had to superintend the change over for Lucius from preparatory school to Rugby. There had been nothing that required any tremendous effort, but there had always been an accumulation of trifling duties which in the mass had presented itself as an impassable barrier to her leading any particular life of her own. It always gave her pleasure when Lady Emily complimented her upon her skill as a housewife or her devotion as a mother, but she carried out the duties of neither with an eye on the effect. She enjoyed being the mistress of a well-run house. She loved her children. She could not imagine a better husband than Terence. At forty-two he was still the Terence who had made up his mind he loved her and who had been willing to prove it by what Lucy realized now much more clearly than she had realized at the time was the courageous step he had taken in marrying out of his own class. At the time she had been inclined to think that if he wanted her as much as he claimed there had not been much credit to him for what he did. Now, after eighteen years of this easy-going, comfortable, well-to-do existence, she understood what a man had to consider

before he committed himself to flinging somebody like herself into the middle of it, for although these well-to-do people were pleasant enough they had very few of them ever come up against the hard facts of life. Very few of them had the slightest understanding of anybody outside their own class, or enough imagination to take the place of direct experience. When one heard them discussing even their own servants they talked of them as if they were hardly human beings at all. Terence always said that the end of that kind of attitude was in sight and that their own children would live to be grateful for the mixed blood of two classes in their veins; but they still seemed securely enough established, these well-to-do ones, and whatever they might read about Russia and other countries there was no sign of their disappearance from England. Among all their friends which of them had done what Terence had done? Which of them had ever even so much as contemplated doing it?

"Still, I am forty even if I don't look it, and while Lucius is still at school and before Joan and Margaret get a bit older and want me always around I think I ought to get out of this rut. Because it's no use pretending I'm not in a rut, and in another eight years I might sprain my ankle getting out of it."

Lucy rose from her dressing-table and went across to the wardrobe where on the top shelf under hatboxes and various odds and ends was Miss Chibbett's scrap-book. She took it down and began to turn over the pages for the first time in four years. Here was a post-card photograph of herself and Gladys West as Henley oarsmen in *On The River*. Yes, she had been plumper twenty years ago, but the difference between herself then and now was encouragingly inconspicuous. They had been appearing as Henley oarsmen, the pair of them, without the slightest idea of what a Henley oarsman was.

Why, she had even thought that Clare College, Cambridge, where Lucius would be going in October of next year, was a school, and that Terence was a schoolboy. It had been a lovely day in April when she and Gladys had gone off to the photographer's in Paddington who was supposed to take the best cheap photograph in London. And old Ma Pilkington had kicked up an awful row that evening because she had left her white flannel trousers at the photographer's. Pilky had told her that if she had left her own drawers behind and brought back the trousers it would have been more sensible. Lucy laughed aloud at the memory of the indignant dresser who had had to go up to the wardrobe mistress and beg another pair of trousers. However, a quartet of gin had smoothed the old girl down. Where was Pilky now? A very old woman, anyway. And on the way back from the photographer's Gladys and she had got off with two boys. . . . "When I think of the boys I used to get off with and what I used to promise them and the chocolates I used to get out of them!"

Lucy paused to wonder for a moment or two if she and Lucius would be intimate enough pals when he was a little older for her to tell him tales about those much deceived boys of long ago. There had been that time when she and Ada Hilton and Nellie Masters had got off with that fellow who had a flat in Charing Cross Mansions, and when he went out to get the chocolates and those cakes for tea they had been so urgently demanding he had supposed that the Terrible Turk had nothing on him. Yes, he had been suspicious at first and afraid they meant to play him up, but Nellie Masters had got into his bed just as she was, all dressed, and he had been so excited by the prospect of the afternoon before him that he had agreed to fetch the cakes, and when they saw him from the window going out into the Charing Cross Road they had turned on both the taps of his bath, and when it was well

overflowing they had run down the stairs and across the road to watch from a shop what would happen when the Terrible Turk returned. The water was just beginning to pour out of the entrance of the flats and across the pavement into the Charing Cross Road when he got back loaded with paper bags. And the porter had come rushing out and shaking his fist at him. What a scream it had been! Nellie Masters had married a waiter at Frascati's soon after that, and Ada Hilton like so many others had been lost sight of when the Orient ballet was disbanded. They were lads, both of them. You couldn't have called Gladys West a lad, because she was always too frightened of what the Baron would say. That afternoon coming back from the photographer's in Paddington she had been terribly nervous in case those two soppy boys they had got off with would find out they were both at the Orient and speak to her by the stage-door after the show. Well, if what poor old Chibbs had told her was correct Gladys West's Baron had left her six years now and all her trouble not to upset him had gone for nothing. Hullo, here was a card of Gladys West's mother stuck into the scrap-book.

Mrs. West

21 *Hornton Place*
Kensington
W.

Furnished Apartments

Why should she not go and see if Gladys still lived there? Why should she not drive there this very afternoon? She and Terence were to celebrate her birthday

by dining together at the *Café Royal* as they always did on her birthday, although like so many girls, so many ballets, and her own youth the old grill-room where they had had supper on that night, to every incident of which Terence had sworn they should look back in the future with such tenderness, was gone for ever. He had been right, had Terence. It would be a surprise for him to hear she had been to see Gladys West. Besides, if she did not make up her mind to go to-day she should probably never go. And this April weather, so lovely to-day, could not be counted on even to-morrow.

Lucy rang the bell.

“Please tell Wilson I want my car at half-past two,” she said to the maid.

CHAPTER TEN

GLADYS WEST

PERHAPS it had been the prospect of Mrs. West's demise which had induced Baron Erik de Rosen to leave the rooms in Hornton Place which he had occupied for twenty-two years, and incidentally to sever his liaison with Gladys, just after her fortieth birthday. The old lady was getting on for seventy-five, and for two or three years she had been visibly failing. When she was gone the Baron would find himself without that complaisant chaperon and, what was more bitter to contemplate, without that excellent landlady who had made him so extremely comfortable for so long. Perhaps if the Baron could have felt sure that Gladys would know how to make him equally comfortable he might have endured the lack of chaperonage.

At forty Gladys had still been an attractive piece of womanhood. She had filled out, but she showed no signs of filling out extravagantly, and the Baron had the testimony of her mother's remarkably neat figure to help him to guess how Gladys would develop during this next decade. Where Gladys could not compete with her mother, however, was in her cooking. Gladys was not a good cook, and on the two or three occasions on which the Baron had had to depend on her cooking he had always sulked for a week afterwards.

The Baron had anticipated Mrs. West's demise by something under a year, and there was no doubt that his decision to leave Hornton Place hastened her death. The old lady was mercifully spared the grief and mortification of living to hear of the Baron's marriage, two years

after quitting Hornton Place, to a large bell-shaped widow with a thousand a year of her own. The Baron was then fifty-four, the widow a year older, and therefore it might have been presumed that it was not weariness of the slim female form which had tempted him to experiment with ampler charms, that it was in fact not the size of the widow, but the size of the widow's income which had led him to make the severance with Hornton Place irreparable. Mrs. West to her last breath never admitted even in private conversation with her daughter the relationship between her and the Baron, and therefore she could only console Gladys for the Baron's tardy fickleness by including her as a part of that house in Hornton Place he had so heartlessly deserted. When she assured Gladys that their late lodger would certainly come back to the rooms where he had been so comfortable for twenty-two years, Gladys might know perfectly well that her own bedroom was thrown in with the two rooms on the first floor which the Baron had occupied, but the allusion was never stressed either by herself or her mother. If she was depressed by the Baron's abandonment of her, such depression was treated on a par with the depression of the very furniture itself.

"I feel quite convinced he will come back, Gladys. He'll miss his chair and he'll miss the way I always made up his fire for him and he'll miss that tripe à la milanaise I used to make for him, and which of course isn't tripe at all, but eggs chopped up with onions and . . ."

"Oh, mother," Gladys would sigh, "you know I can't follow you when you talk about cooking."

"Very well, dear, I won't. And he'll miss that hearth-rug in his sitting-room. He often used to tell me that there wasn't a rug in the whole of his club which could hold a candle to it."

One had a picture of the Baron wandering round

London like a lost cat and like a lost cat bound to find his way home sooner or later.

"We won't let his rooms just yet, Gladys," the old lady used to insist. "It would be such a shock to him if he came back and found them taken. My idea is he's gone on the wander for a time. So we won't let his rooms just yet, especially with me not being able to get about like I used to."

It never entered Gladys's head when her mother died to sell the lease of Hornton Place and go on the wander herself. She was a young-looking forty-two, but she had not had an engagement since just before the Baron left her. Another explanation of his severing the liaison might have been found in the routine of his meeting Gladys every night after the show having been upset by her failure to secure an engagement. It had a serious side for the Baron, because Gladys with no dressing-room gossip to chatter about chattered instead about the novels she had been reading, and with neither rehearsal nor performance to occupy her she took to reading many more novels than formerly.

So when Mrs. West had been decorously buried in Brompton Cemetery Gladys immediately assumed her position as the mistress of Hornton Place. She did not change her mother's card. She felt that *Miss Gladys West above Furnished Apartments* would look as unsuitable as *Mrs. West* would have looked among the chorus in a theatre programme. Moreover, the use of her mother's card gave her the feeling that her mother was still hovering round her and protecting her.

Not that Gladys stood nearly as much in need of her mother's hovering protection as might have been expected from so long a dependence upon her judgment. A dormant gift for household management was roused when Mrs. West died, and none of the lodgers in Hornton Place noticed the change of headship. It was true that

the new landlady could not cook, but she engaged a good cook who came for low wages because she was having an affair with a married man and therefore welcomed the opportunity of a bedroom in the basement next to the kitchen, having divined from her employer's reply to a tentative enquiry about company that Miss West would not be puritanical. Gladys herself, with no false romantic notions from the "better type of novel" she read, lost no time in letting the Baron's two rooms. She also let the ground floor, by giving up what was now her sitting-room and her nice bedroom behind it with the Maple's furniture. She herself emptied one of the attics by selling a quantity of lumber which her mother had been cherishing for years, and she had serious thoughts of getting rid of the maid of all work and acting as house-maid herself, but looked at her hands and decided it was too soon to spoil them. The two extra rooms would more than pay for the cook.

When the Baron married his large bell-shaped widow, Gladys tried for a while to believe herself injured, but having no confidante to feed her sense of injury she soon found it evaporating in speculation upon the physical relationship between the Baron and his wife, for Gladys did not presume as the rest of the world might her late friend's sudden indifference to the flesh. She had not yet seen the Baroness in person; but the Baron either in order to maintain the picture that he and Gladys were nothing more than friends or merely because he supposed that what was of interest and importance to himself must be of equal interest and importance to everybody else had sent to Hornton Place a large photograph of himself and his wife, in which her size and campanulate shape were obvious in spite of her being seated, with the Baron in white spats and white insets to his waistcoat standing beside her and leaning over her sloping shoulders. English conservatism could offer no finer example of

itself than the possibility of still being able to get such a photograph taken and printed with so lustrous a gloss in the year 1930.

With this likeness of the couple in front of her, a likeness not blurred by any of the tricks with which modern photographers ape painting, it was easy for Gladys to let her fancy play round their intimate life. If she had often found it difficult to refrain from giggling in her own bedroom at the sight of the Baron in his dressing-gown, she found that the picture in her mind's eye of the Baron in dalliance with his bell-shaped wife provoked peal on peal of irresistible laughter, and in this laughter, that solitary laughter which refreshes the human soul, the last vestige of the wound to her pride was healed, the last flicker of resentment was quenched.

"You're looking very merry and bright this morning, mum," her cook had observed in some perplexity, for this amorous creature was unable to imagine such early morning gaiety without the prelude of a satisfactory night. She wondered if the missus had been carrying on with the second-floor front or back. Neither of them was *her* style, but you never knew.

Another year went by before Gladys actually met the Baroness. She then found the conjugal position of herself and the Baron an even more fruitful subject for curious speculation than she had supposed it could be. It was clear the Baroness had no suspicion of the former intimacy of her husband with this little woman, really quite a superior person for a landlady. She had descended from the provinces to obtain a second husband, and she saw in Gladys merely a convenient peg on which to hang the heavy weight of her patronage. Once or twice Gladys fancied that the Baron gave her a furtive glance of appreciation as if he would welcome an opportunity to enter her room once more in that dressing-gown which had always made her want to giggle, but it might just as

easily have been a cautionary glance or even the rotund little man's pride in possession of this massive woman. The Baron's glances had never been eloquent.

"I have persuaded the Baron to give up business, Miss West, and we are going to make a world tour. World tours are so much more enjoyable than these shorter cruises on which one is apt to find oneself hob-nobbing with such very common people. Have you done any cruising yet?" And to Gladys's negative she continued ponderously. "You should, you know, when you can find the necessary time. There is nothing in my estimation which broadens the mind like cruising. After the death of my first husband and nursing him through a very long and painful illness I felt quite done in, and for an experiment my friends persuaded me to try a cruise to the West Indies. That was five years ago, and I often say now that my motto ought to be 'A life on the ocean wave.' So the Baron and I are following the swallows in quest of warmer climes."

Oh, that some of the girls from the Orient in the old days could hear this woman now! She could fancy Jenny Pearl, "Oh, hark at her! In quest of warmer climes! Oh, the dirty old thing, what would you do with her?" Or Lucy Arnold, "In quest of warmer climes. What? Give her two hot-water bottles and the Baron, and she'll be well sunburnt before morning."

"Well, good-bye, Miss West. It has been quite a pleasure to meet you. And next year when we return from our world tour, and if we decide to take a little flat in London somewhere not too far from Piccadilly, for I love dear old Piccadilly, you will have to come to tea with us."

For a moment Gladys could hear all the girls in Room 45 shrieking with delight at this, but in a moment it had turned back to the singing of the canaries in the ground-floor's sitting-room, which had once been her mother's

and hers, and which she still used for visitors like these, because the ground-floor was a journalist and was always out from twelve o'clock till eight or nine.

Since that world cruise Gladys had not seen the Baron and his large bell-shaped Baroness, but she had had one or two postcards from places with unpronounceable names, and finally a postcard from Torquay to announce that they had settled there.

But Gladys still laughed to herself at the thought of the Baron making love to the Baroness. Indeed, on that April afternoon when Lucy Manning was forty and she was driving in her two-seater sports car toward Hornton Place, Gladys was laughing to herself at this thought, and then moving suddenly realized from where she was standing by the window of the ground-floor's sitting-room how green already the trees were in Holland Park, with London's precocious green of spring, Gladys was wishing that she were not forty-five and that the sunny silence of this room did not seem so eternally silent. She whistled to the lazy canaries that they might sing and break it, and as their throats began to quiver in response a car pulled up at the door.

Gladys seeing a smartly dressed woman making for the steps of her own house hurried into the ground-floor's bedroom and rapidly dealt with powder and its accessories for the maid-of-all-work was at the top of the house, and she would have to open the door herself.

"Hullo, Gladys. It's my birthday. So I thought I'd give myself a treat and come and pay you a visit."

"Goodness! It's . . . it's Lucy Arnold."

"The boy guessed right the very first time. Now don't start asking why I haven't ever been to see you before in nearly twenty years, because every good excuse I had I've forgotten fifteen years ago."

"Oh, Lucy, I am glad to see you, I am really."

"Oh, she's really pleased!"

"Come on in here, Lucy, though it's not actually my room any longer since mother died."

"Is your mother dead? Oh, I am sorry."

"She died nearly—yes, nearly five years ago. I'm all on my own now."

"I remember this room perfectly well," said Lucy, looking round her.

"It belongs to one of my lodgers now, but he's always out in the afternoon."

"Our lodger's such a nice young man, he's so good, so kind, to all the familee," Lucy sang.

"No, really without a joke, Lucy, he is awfully nice."

"You'd better book him up. How old are you, Gladys?"

"Forty-five! Isn't it shocking?"

"Well, I'm forty to-day, and you don't look any older than me."

"Oh, Lucy, don't talk so silly. You look terribly young. In fact you haven't hardly altered at all."

"Came the dawn. You can't produce three massive kids and not show the creases a bit. Invisible mending's what I'm looking for now. My boy is seventeen. And two girls, thirteen and eleven."

"Did you hear the Baron is married?"

"I knew he'd broken off with you. Chibbs told me, but I didn't know he was married. That must have been after Chibbs died. Poor old dear. I still miss her. She was the only person I used to talk over the old days with. And so the Baron de Beef is married. Some soppy kid, I suppose, who ought to have been still in school?"

"No . . . wait a minute, Lucy, I'll show you." Gladys went off to fetch the photograph, which she put into Lucy's hands without a word of comment.

"Wha-a-t?" exclaimed Lucy. "Oranges and lemons say the bells of St. Clements. But look at her shape!"

I ask you. No wedding-bells for her. She wouldn't need them. She could ring herself."

Gladys began to laugh.

"He went bats in the belfry, I should say, and cut the rope. But did you ever see such a figure? Why, if she looked down another inch she'd get her chin stuck between her cabman's rests."

Gladys went on laughing. She had laughed to herself so often about the Baron and his Baroness, but she had never had a chance to laugh with a sympathetic companion. She seemed likely to have hysterics.

"Hey! hey! Pull yourself together, Gladys, or the neighbours will think you're being tickled by the lodger."

"But you don't know, Lucy, how I've laughed to myself over that photograph. And if you'd only seen her. She's a real scream. She is really. And they go cruising together."

Gladys collapsed in an armchair, helpless with laughter. She laughed so much that Lucy began to laugh too, and presently both of them were sitting in armchairs, laughing one against the other.

"Oh, I haven't enjoyed myself so much for years," declared Gladys at last, exhausted by laughter and dabbing at her eyes.

They passed on from the Baron to talk of the old days at Orient and of the girls they had known there.

"Here, who do you think I saw last week?" Gladys asked. "Queenie Danvers. Do you remember her?"

"Of course I remember her. She pinched a brooch of yours. I used to hear about her from Chibbs. She's been in prison and all sorts of things."

"I know, but when I met her the other day she was coming out of Bourne and Hollingsworth. . . ."

"She'd probably got half a dozen of their hats under her skirt," said Lucy.

"Well," she said to me, 'aren't you Gladys West who

used to work at the Orient? I'm Queenie Danvers.' And I knew she'd been in prison and I'd have felt so awful if I'd said 'no' and so I said 'yes.'"

"You were chatty, weren't you, duckie?"

"Mrs. Wood she is now. She's got an hotel."

"More likely a case-house."

"She asked me to go and see her sometime."

"Oh, she's going in for the white slave traffic now."

"Well, I don't know, Lucy, she looked sort of battered about, and I couldn't say 'no' and so I said 'yes.' I'd never have known her if she hadn't spoken to me first and said her name. You know she was always a bit scraggy years ago? Well, scraggy isn't the word for her now. I really felt sorry for her, and anyway I've been thinking lately that I never went anywhere nowadays and just sort of did nothing except fuss about a house, and I don't know, I think it's bad for anyone to get like that. You've no idea what a lot of good it's done me you coming as such a surprise this afternoon. And so I thought I would go and see Queenie. After all, she must have a great deal to talk about. She's led the life."

"All right, I'll come with you. At least I will if you'll come over to Paris with me. My treat of course."

"To Paris?"

"Yes, I want to go and see Rita Vitali, and I don't want to go alone and yet I don't want to go with any of the women I know nowadays. They're all right, but they're not my sort for a visit to Paris."

"But how could I leave my house?"

"Of course you could. We wouldn't be away more than a week. Haven't you got anyone to help you?"

"Well, there's the cook. Only she's having an affair with a married man. I think she has him into her room sometimes, only I live up at the top of the house, and don't hear what goes on in the basement."

"Well, you certainly won't hear from Paris."

"No, that's just it. It would make me feel funny the idea of a strange man coming into the house while I was away."

"How many lodgers have you got?"

"Five at present."

"And all men?"

Gladys nodded.

"Then what's the use of talking nonsense about being afraid of strange men in the house? Of course you'll come to Paris. We'll go at the beginning of May. It'll be lovely then."

"I would like awfully to come, Lucy."

"Then say 'yes' to me the same as you said it to Queenie Danvers."

"Yes."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

QUEENIE DANVERS

ON that April night, at the moment when Terence and Lucy were hailing the taxi that would drive them home after a birthday commemoration spent in dining at the Café Royal and in dancing at their club, a young woman walking along the length of Edgware Road for the second time since one a.m. was aware of footsteps behind her. Remembering that just as she had passed the Metropolitan Music Hall a man on the other side of the road had hesitated as if anxious for a closer glimpse of her, she looked back over her shoulder to see if they were his footsteps. She noticed he seemed to draw away quickly from the light of the street-lamp, and her better judgment suggested that she should walk quickly on without appearing aware of his interest. On any other night she would have done so; but this was the first night she had been well enough to attend to her professional duties for nearly three weeks. She owed money to her landlady in Maida Vale. They had had a set out this afternoon which had ended in her being expelled from the house with an intimation from an open window on the first floor that she need not come back until she had the money for her arrears of rent and that the door would be bolted against her to-night. The only two girl friends from whom she could have begged a temporary lodging were both away with men, holiday-making somewhere for Easter. She had been trailing on her feet or sitting in the Park for hours without attracting custom. It was now after half-past one. The lamplit distance of the Edgware Road stretched infinitely, it seemed, before her

and behind her. She did not like being accosted by fellows who avoided the light, but . . . she slowed down her pace, and a moment later she heard herself asked where she was going.

"Nowhere in particular. It's such a lovely night, isn't it?" she forced herself to say in accents the weariness of which would not reveal how deadly sick she was of this lovely night.

"Do you live near here?"

"Well, I'm afraid I can't take you to my place, darling. I'm not staying in gay rooms."

Her possible customer, who she was relieved to find had neither squint nor projecting upper teeth nor any of the outward signs of which girls on the game are commonly wary, dropped back in evident disappointment.

"But I know a nice quiet little hotel just round the corner from where we are. It won't cost you more than twelve and six and a small tip for the man who lets you out, or if you want to stay all night another three and six for breakfast. It's quite clean. Quite all right really. I know the woman who keeps it."

The man looked round him. There was nobody in sight.

"All right," he said, "but only for a short time."

As he looked round like that she was again seized by a faint foreboding, but the alternative was too unpleasant, and she took his arm.

"Round here, dear. It's not three minutes away. What's the matter, have you got the toothache?" she asked, noting that he was holding a handkerchief to his face with the arm that was disengaged.

"Yes. Had it all day. I've been trying to walk it off."

"Never mind," she said, in an effort to put things on a friendly footing, "a little love will do it good."

There was no response from the arm she held, and

when she squeezed it she could fancy she was squeezing steel.

"Goodness, aren't you strong!" she exclaimed. She would have liked to ask him something about himself, but he seemed too indifferent for her to risk the least inquisitiveness until he had paid for the room. After all, if he bilked her, at any rate he would have given her a bed for the night, and that was beyond everything what she craved at this moment. Oh, how tired she was!

"Here we are, dear. Parker Street, this is."

Once again, before ascending the flight of cracked steps which led up to the door above which on a dimly lighted square of frosted glass was printed in worn black lettering *Nook Hotel*, the customer glanced quickly to right and left of him.

"Anybody would think you were ashamed to be seen with me," she could not resist saying, but she was quick to give a light double-knock on the door, and to her relief it opened almost immediately to admit them to a narrow gaslit hall, at the end of which near the stairs stood a rickety table on which lay an open register with a dusty inkpot beside it.

"Oh, it's you, Mrs. Wood," she said to the gaunt woman who had opened the door. "Where's Henry to-night?"

"Henry's laid up. I'm taking night duty myself while he's away," replied she who was once Queenie Danvers, pulling the faded blue wrapper she was wearing more closely round her thin body and stepping forward to proffer the register.

"Sign anything you like," she said in a hoarse voice. "Are you staying all night?"

The man, still holding the handkerchief to his face, shook his head, and nodded to the girl who had brought him in to sign the register. She dripped the pen in the ink and scrawled, "Mr. and Mrs. J. Smith." Then she

took the hostess further along the passage for a brief consultation.

"My friend only wants to stay a short time," she explained, "but I'd like to stay till morning. I'm too tired to go back to my place so late."

"Twelve and six. He can let himself out. I'm not going to sit up any longer. I'll show you the room. What's the matter with his face?" the hostess asked, with a suspicious glance from her dark eyes at the man waiting in the passage.

"He's got the toothache."

Mrs. Wood sniffed.

"You make him give you your money first," she advised. "Twelve and six *I* want."

The girl rejoined her customer.

"Mrs. Wood would like to be paid now for the room. She says you can let yourself out quite easily. The porter usually on duty is away ill, and she doesn't want to sit up any longer. Twelve and six she wants."

The man, still holding the handkerchief to his face, fumbled in his pocket with the other hand which was gloved, and at last produced the money in silver.

"You won't have to tip the man who usually lets everybody out," said the girl, as they followed the hostess up the stairs covered with cracked oilcloth, hoping that this release from the obligation of tipping would be remembered when he gave her her own present. She had bargained about her fee. It was a night's sleep she craved. If he gave her no more than ten shillings she would not argue with him. If he bilked her altogether she would not make a row . . . sleep . . . sleep . . . sleep . . . anything for sleep. . . .

The room they were shown into was on the first floor just at the head of the stairs. It seemed as gaunt as the gaunt woman who threw open its door. An iron bedstead with sagging mattress and squalid sheets: a

washstand in a decrepit condition not made less conspicuous by an uneven coat of pink paint: a chair, the cane seat of which had burst in the middle: a dressing-table of varnished deal with a mirror from which a piece had been chipped in the corner to lay bare the mercury at the back: a threadbare strip of carpet: a torn holland blind between curtains of yellow Nottingham lace: the sickly green glow of incandescent gas for illumination. That was the room.

"Close the door downstairs quietly when you go out," the hostess warned the man.

He nodded, but did not speak.

"A bilker if ever I saw one," she that had been Queenie Danvers said to herself as she left the couple to themselves and heard the key turn in the lock. "Oh well, it's her funeral not mine." She patted reassuringly the loose silver in the pocket of her wrapper. Then she considered the gas burning in the front passage. "Well, he can strike a match and light himself out. All the others are staying the night." She pulled down the ring. The glowing mantle faded into the enveloping darkness, and she that had been Queenie Danvers retired through a door at the back of the passage.

The room which the landlady of the Nook Hotel occupied was immediately under the one she had just let, and in contrast to the bareness of the other was overcrowded with heavy furniture, among which, however, a wardrobe and chest of drawers were wanting so that most of the chairs and sofas were littered with clothes. Nothing remained of the sitting-room in Little Quondam Street she had shared with her father except one of the tinsel prints of harlequins, the only picture indeed on the walls, which were covered with a dark red paper whereon a sprawling pattern was discernible in faded gold.

Queenie Danvers (in the solitude of her bedroom it would be absurd to call her Mrs. Wood, that being merely

a colourless name which had not yet appeared on a charge sheet) picked up a broken comb from a sideboard she used as a toilet-table and began to stride up and down the red felt carpet, yawning and thinking and combing her short curly hair to which the black dye recently renewed gave an almost tarry appearance. That last girl who had come in had been here before two or three times. What was her name? Wasn't it Lily something or other? . . . Lily . . . Lily . . . well, anyway it wasn't worth trying to remember . . . funny cove she had with her . . . if there was anything in her stocking she'd better watch out, or it wouldn't be there when she woke in the morning . . . was he afraid somebody would recognize him as the fellow who pinched ten bob out of a tart's stocking? . . . toothache perhaps . . . you didn't chase after tarts at this time of night if you had toothache. . . .

She broke off for a moment from her striding up and down the small space in the middle of the overcrowded room to take a pinch of snuff from a packet on the table beside her bed. Then she resumed the restless combing of her hair. She mustn't forget to send out for some more lally to-morrow . . . funny thing to pick up a habit in stir . . . where did you learn to sniff lally, Mrs. Wood? Of course she'd always smoked before, but who'd have thought when she came out of Holloway she'd have preferred snuff to cigarettes . . . never smoked now . . . lally, always lally . . . what had made her ask that woman Gladys West to come round and see her . . . what you called a sudden impulse when the beak asked you what made you do it . . . she ought to get into bed and not start roaming up and down the room like this when she'd felt too tired to wait and let that fellow out . . . what the hell did Henry want to get ill for just now when business was looking up with the Easter holidays . . . silly little squirt . . . if only she

could rake enough together from this one-eyed joint she'd put in for a more flash place nearer Piccadilly . . . she wasn't going to be jugged again, though . . . you got out of the swim . . . she'd let herself go these last three years . . . no mistake about that, and at forty-six it wasn't so easy to get into it again . . . damned lucky for her she'd been able to help Long Harry, and luckier still Long Harry hadn't forgotten it . . . poor b——r, she wouldn't see him again now till she was over fifty . . . and she used to dream twenty years ago about helping fellows to escape from the Moor . . . she'd dreamed a glorious lot of things twenty years ago . . . still, take it all in all she'd done more than most women did . . . she *could* look back to the time she'd been somebody in a world where you weren't somebody so easily as all that . . . and if she hadn't squeezed old Carlow quite so hard she could still have been milking him . . . she ought to have taken warning when Balladyne shot himself . . . she ought to have learnt from that you can squeeze a fellow *too* hard . . . she'd made a mistake when she asked for that last couple of thousand . . . she'd thought he still had plenty left from that racket of his during the war . . . but he couldn't have had . . . yes, she'd gone too far, and then like a fool when old Carlow showed signs of being squeezed too hard she'd gone on squeezing, and that had put her right out . . . in fact if she hadn't been able to lend Long Harry that money when he wanted it so badly and if Long Harry hadn't been so white she might have gone right under . . . when you reached forty-six and looked like an old tear ten years older than you were you wanted to watch out if you weren't going to end selling matches and laces . . . but this was no game, walking about after two o'clock in the morning and thinking of the mistakes you'd made . . . anyway, she was getting a living from the Nook, and if she was careful and kept on

the right side of the police and didn't allow people to kick up rows she'd save enough money here yet to move up West . . . if she found she couldn't get the right place up West she'd spend a bit of money in furnishing up the Nook and let out her rooms in the afternoon . . . girls soon got to know of a nice quiet place to bring a fellow in the afternoon . . . but with the rooms furnished like they were it was no good letting people come in the afternoon . . . things looked too bare by daylight . . . she never ought to have asked that woman Gladys West to come here . . . what the hell did she want to see her for . . . a silly mare who'd let a fellow string her along for the best part of her life and then left her standing on the wrong side of the road . . . anyway, she'd probably never come . . . she'd probably said "Yes" because she was too frightened to say "No" . . . she was that kind of a woman . . . still, if she did come she wouldn't mind so much . . . she'd make a change from the usual visitors. . . .

"God, I might be lousy the way I'm combing my blasted hair to-night," she exclaimed aloud. "Go to sleep, you silly fool."

Pulling off her things and tossing them anywhere, Queenie Danvers turned the gas low and got into bed. She soon fell asleep; but at twenty-one minutes past three she sat suddenly up, wide awake and listening. No sound that might account for this summons from sleep was audible. There was only the ticking of the clock beside her bed, showing her the time in the dim light of the lowered gas. A minute or two afterwards she heard footsteps in the room overhead, and in spite of telling herself that such a sound was perfectly natural in the circumstances her heart began to beat very fast.

"He's only dressing himself. Lie down and go to sleep again."

But she had to go on listening. After a few minutes

the footsteps were heard no more above, and she began to listen for the click of the bed-room key being turned and the creaking of the stairs as he came down to the front hall.

“Why don’t you get up and see him off the premises?” she taunted herself.

A stair creaked. Another stair creaked. There was the scratch of a struck match. He was walking down the passage now. She heard the sound of a handle being turned, the gentle snap of a closed door.

“It’s the feel of sleeping without the chain on the door,” she said to herself uneasily, and suddenly in a wild panic she sprang out of bed. Without waiting even to find her slippers she hurried along the dark passage in her nightdress, turned the key in the front-door, put on the chain, shot both bolts, and fled back to bed like a hunted witch.

By noon next day there was still no sign of Number 3’s bedroom being vacated.

“She can’t lie there all day,” Mrs. Wood grumbled to the smutty-faced slavey who was responsible for looking after those gaunt bedrooms upstairs. “Go up and knock on the door and tell her it’s after twelve o’clock and you want to do the room. You can take her in a cup of tea,” she added as an afterthought.

Mrs. Wood went back into her own room, and sat down at a desk to make up her accounts. She had lain awake for a long time after that sudden start from sleep, and she was feeling thoroughly fed up with the Nook Hotel this morning. The accounts were being examined in order to plan if possible some way of hastening that dreamed of move to a more flash establishment up West. Presently from the room above she heard the crash of broken crockery and a scream.

“What the hell is all this noise about?” she rushed out to shout up from the foot of the stairs at the moment

when the smutty-faced slavey came rushing down from the bedroom just beyond the head of them, her cheeks green with horror.

"Oh, my gawd, mum! Oh, my gawd, she's dead! She's been done in, mum. I seed her tongue hanging out and her eyes bulging, mum. Oh, my gawd, I dropped the tea-tray, I was that scared."

And that is why when Lucy Manning and Gladys West drove into Parker Street about four hours later they found a small crowd staring up at the tatterdemalion little hotel, and a policeman standing at the bottom of the cracked grey steps leading to the front door.

Lucy enquired from the window of the car what was the matter.

"There's been a murder, miss," the policeman informed her. "Some unfortunate been strangled."

"Are we right for Harrow Road?" Lucy asked quickly.

"You're quite correct, miss. Bear round to your left at the end of this street."

She drove on at once.

"You don't think Queenie Danvers has been murdered, do you, Lucy?" Gladys asked tremulously.

"I don't know," said Lucy. "But I jolly well wasn't going to ask. Why, we might have been dragged into it. I told you if she had an hotel round this part it must be a case-house. You keep away from Queenie Danvers, Gladys. You're a big girl now, but you aren't old enough yet for high life at the Nook Hotel."

"You don't think it *was* her they strangled, then?"

"Well, he'd have said it was the woman who owned the place, I should think, if it had been Queenie Danvers. Anyhow, we'll see it in the evening papers. You'd better come back and have tea with me in Cheyne Walk."

"But I've just had lunch with you already to-day, Lucy."

"Never mind, you won't get tired of me yet. I haven't seen you at all for nearly twenty years. And we've got a lot to settle about our trip to Paree."

"It'll be awful if it *was* Queenie who was murdered," said Gladys in an awed voice. "If it *was* her, that'll be the second girl I've known who was murdered."

CHAPTER TWELVE

RITA VITALI

“OH look, Lucy, do look. Look at that bus,” exclaimed Gladys West when on the morning after their arrival in Paris she was being taken by Lucy to see the shops in the Rue de Rivoli.

“What’s the matter with it?” Lucy asked in bewilderment.

“It’s got BASTILLE on it.”

“What of it?”

“But it’s so exciting.”

“The people in it don’t look very excited.”

“No, not exciting for them. Exciting for me.”

“Here, if you’re going to start in getting excited by buses,” said Lucy severely, “I’ll let you go out by yourself. I’m not going to be shown up in Paris by anybody.”

“But Bastille, Lucy.”

“Bastille?”

“Yes, I never somehow thought there really was such a place. *The Three Musketeers . . . A Tale of Two Cities . . . The Man in the Iron Mask. . . .*”

“Who was he?”

“Nobody knows. He was kept in the Bastille for years and years and made to wear an iron mask all the time.”

“Wore an iron mask for years and years?”

“Yes.”

“And never took it off?”

“Never.”

“Don’t be silly, woman. How did he blow his nose?”

"It's true, Lucy. It is really. And he *was* in the Bastille."

"Well, he's not there now, is he?"

"No."

"Then there's nothing for you to worry about. You're a real worrier, Gladys. You've no sooner stopped worrying about your cook in Hornton Place than you start in worrying about a man in an iron mask. The only thing we've got to worry about is whether we'll find where Rita Vitali lives. The address in Chibbs's scrapbook was her address over five years ago, don't forget."

As a matter of fact, they were only just in time to catch Rita at the address they had for her in a street off the Boulevard des Capucines. She was actually in the middle of packing up, having just decided to come back and live in London. Her second husband had died the previous year, and the twins were both married to Englishmen and were now living, one at Highgate and the other at Hornsey.

"And I'm a grandmother four times over," she told her visitors.

"Well, I think you're the best-looking grandmother I ever saw," Lucy declared enthusiastically.

And indeed there was reason for enthusiasm. The dark smooth hair was now grey, of that grey which suggests not a tired surrender to age but a deliberate encouragement of it like powdered hair. The attractively artificial effect was heightened by the dark eyebrows and the lustrous almond eyes just slanting. The oval face had kept its contours, and it was only at very close range that one perceived the faint lines engraved upon the ivory skin. Her figure had filled out, but not more than was necessary to display to best advantage her grey hair.

"Your coming to see me like this at the end of my

time in Paris has made me so happy," she told her visitors. "I was feeling just a little afraid of going back to live in London after thirteen years. It will be lovely to be near Blanche and Bianca, but it doesn't do to be always on the spot as mother, mother-in-law, and grandmother. And I was wondering who I should find for friends of my own."

"Where are you going to live?" asked Gladys.

"I've not decided yet. But somewhere within five minutes of Leicester Square if I can find a flat. I look so respectable that I think I can afford to live there by myself. I used to envy girls at the Orient like you, Lucy, who lived within a short walk of the theatre. I used to feel so out of things, rattling away every night out to Golders Green. I missed Soho. Perhaps I'll go back to Soho. Yes, I expect I will. I don't suppose it will be easy to find any place with windows that actually look down into Piccadilly Circus."

"You won't start a school again?"

"No, Lucy. We had such a lovely school here, with me teaching my dancing, and my second husband Pol Mesnil teaching his singing. And since he died it has never been the same. Besides, there is so little to teach them dancing *for* in England. It's always novelty the English audience wants, or at any rate the London audience. Here in Paris they are much more conservative in artistic matters. The theatre is still the theatre in Paris. In London it has become a poor relation of the talkies. But I'm afraid I'm becoming a poor relation of the talkies myself," she ended with a smile of apology.

"Did you know you'd got a slight foreign accent now, Rita?" Lucy asked.

"Have I? It's not intended. It's not an affectation, Lucy. Never mind. After a few weeks in London I'll have none of it left. I wish Miss Chibbett had not died.

I heard—I don't remember who told me—that you were very good to her, Lucy."

Lucy shook her head.

"She was jolly handy with her needle. That was all my goodness to her. Jolly good she was. Wouldn't she have been excited to have heard we'd all met again? But I'd have brought her with me. I don't know why I never came before."

"I think we all feel like that," Rita said. "I've been cursing my laziness for letting so many friends drop. But letters are the only way of trying to keep up with people, and I so hate writing letters."

"Well, now we have met again," Gladys declared solemnly, "we mustn't lose sight of one another. Really I'm the one to be most grateful, because after all, Lucy, you have lots of friends of your own, and Rita has her two girls and their kids, but I've only got five lodgers."

That evening Rita took her visitors to the opera, and it was arranged that at the end of a week she should travel back with them to England when she was finished with her packing. Then she found various cavaliers to escort them to other theatres and show them Paris by day, while she busied herself with her move.

On the evening before she was to leave Paris, one of the cavaliers who had been looking after Lucy and Gladys, a handsome middle-aged English bachelor whose fondness for women had kept him most of his life in Paris, came round to say good-bye to Rita.

Francis Wilmot found her among the trunks and boxes and sacking-swathed furniture that was to follow her when she had decided on a new home for herself.

"So you really do seem determined to leave Paris," he commented.

"Seem, Francis? You've known for weeks I was determined to leave."

"Why?"

"Because I am middle-aged, Francis. Because I am a grandmother and like all grandmothers believe that my daughters are quite incapable of bringing up their own offspring. Because perhaps I was a little disappointed when Blanche and Bianca opened their stage career so triumphantly and immediately they were a success settled to marry two very nice but extremely dull young Englishmen. You see, Francis, I had always dreamed that they would make the artistic success which I managed to miss, as I used to think, because I had married at twenty-two a man twenty-five years older than myself. It is true that Blanche who married first was quite convinced she was very much in love. Perhaps she was. But I am sure that Bianca just had to fancy herself in love in order to marry another young Englishman as much like her sister's husband as she could find."

"I still don't see why this event of at least five years ago should drive you away from Paris now."

"You must remember that Pol is dead."

"May I ask an unpardonably impertinent question?"

"Ask away."

"Did you love Pol?"

"My dear Francis, have you been for the last quarter of a century the King of Parisian bachelors, and so the keeper of how many women's consciences without discovering that a woman of thirty-nine who marries a man of fifty *en secondes noces* is not usually in love like a school-girl. I was very fond of my first husband and very sorry for him. I was very fond of Pol, but I was not at all sorry for him. We were the best friends in the world. We had similar ideas about earning a living. I miss him very much. And Paris without him is not really Paris at all. I shall be happier in London."

"I hoped you would answer like that, Rita, because you are now . . . well . . . you must be nearly fifty. . . ."

“I’m fifty-two!”

“I only judged you to be fifty by your reminiscences not by your face or figure. Well, you are fifty-two, and I shall be sixty next year. Do you think you could marry for a third time, just because you and I are such very good friends? I suppose in my middle-aged way I am as much in love as I have . . .”

“No, Francis, please!” she interrupted, with a smile. “Don’t say ‘as much as you have ever been with any woman,’ because that really wouldn’t be true, and I don’t want you to treat me like an idiot. Fifty-two, Francis, fifty-two. And twice married. Please remember that.”

“I said in my middle-aged way,” Francis Wilmot reminded her. “And by that I mean I cannot imagine any companion with whom I would sooner confront the disquieting decade in front of me. I hasten to add that if you are bent on quitting Paris for London I am perfectly willing to forsake Paris, and I think that may tell you better than anything how much I want to marry you.”

Rita shook her head.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to be quite selfish, Francis. I don’t really want to begin something new. You mustn’t mind if I tell you that I don’t want to marry you for the same reason that I don’t want to start a third dancing-school when I go back to London. I couldn’t give you, or indeed anybody, the one great thing I’ve missed in life which is a passionate love for a man. It would be very undignified at my age if I could. And I’m sure anybody as *blasé* as you where women are concerned would be very embarrassed by the idea of my even thinking I could.”

“Yes, in spite of two husbands and two daughters you still have a strangely virginal air,” he said.

“I think you had better say old-maidish instead of virginal,” Rita laughed. “Or I shall begin to think you want to marry me in order to seduce me.”

"I see you don't intend to marry me, whatever I say, and so I'm not going to bore you by making you repeat your refusal. But I won't promise not to quit Paris myself and turn up in London."

"Now really, Francis, you are beginning to exaggerate. Besides, you won't like me at all in London. I shall get back my slight Cockney accent and a London point of view about life, which is so different from the Paris point of view. And you'll wonder how you ever tolerated such a common old woman. And you'd become grumpy. Oh no, Francis, I'm sure you oughtn't ever to leave Paris. After all, you can pay brief visits to London, and I will escort you to the theatres, though of course I shall never rub it into you that I am escorting *you*. And then if you do find me slowly reverting to what I once was, the leader of the first line of boys at the Orient Palace of Varieties, you'll always be able to retreat to Paris again, and give up your expeditions across the Channel."

"You are an adorable woman, aren't you?" he sighed.

"Am I, Francis? How is it then that I have reached the age of fifty-two without once experiencing really violent love-making?"

"Perhaps young men were always a little frightened of you. I was not exactly a young man when you first came to Paris in 1920, but I was . . . well, I was still finding it easy to attract women, and I made up my mind that I would make love to you at the first opportunity."

"And you never did, Francis," she murmured in mock reproach.

"No, never. It would have seemed like going into the Louvre and making love to the Venus of Milo."

"Oh, Francis, did I seem so cold and so large as all that?"

"No, nothing to do with coldness. I suppose it was a kind of awe of your perfection."

"What dreadful nonsense you're talking, Francis. Why don't you confess that you were afraid of a rebuff and that a man of your experience knew his vanity would not survive a rebuff from any woman? It would have crumpled you up, Francis. You would have aged rapidly from that moment."

"My vanity has not been wounded by your refusal to marry me."

"No, because you've waited till we were both too old to introduce that side of the business which does wound vanity. You know that I'm refusing to marry you, Francis, not because I don't want to sleep with you, but because I want to go on sleeping by myself. And now if I'm going to be ready for the opera to-night you must let me dress. I want you to arrange for us to go round to the *foyer de danse*. I should like that to be my last memory of Paris."

"The Pantheon of the ballet . . . of course, that can be managed quite easily . . . your portrait should have been upon those walls. Ah, Rita, if I had met you when I was twenty-five and you were eighteen . . . that was in '99."

"The year I went to the Orient."

"I'd have made you another Taglioni."

"I wonder . . . but what rubbish we're talking. As if the lack of a Francis could stop a Taglioni! Now, please go, like a good man and leave me to dress."

"We're dining *chez Prunier*."

"*C'est bien. Au revoir . . . cher frère.*"

"*Adieu, what might have been!*"

Rita went up to her dismantled bedroom and began to dress.

Her last night in Paris, at any rate as a resident! What a ridiculous fascination she had for middle-aged men older than herself. Edouard . . . Pol . . . and now Francis, who was nearer to her own age than either of

her husbands . . . ought she to feel elated that at fifty-two she should receive a proposal? . . . she certainly didn't . . . it just seemed such a repetition . . . the visit from Lucy Arnold and Gladys West was more exciting . . . and how absurd for Francis to suppose at his age that he wanted to be married . . . no doubt he was afraid of loneliness, but of course he would never admit that, and yet in justice to him he had confessed to what he called the disquieting ten years in front of him . . . but in any case he ought to have known that she was much too *cabotine* for him . . . she was such a fraud . . . thirteen years of this life to which Pol had introduced her had imparted a veneer of cosmopolitan culture, and poor Francis was under the impression that she was *une vraie femme du monde* . . . he had lived in Paris so long that he had forgotten how to judge people from an English standard . . . he was a delightful creature for such an evening as was before them . . . nobody could order a dinner better than Francis or flatter more skilfully the woman he was escorting with the feeling that it was they who were giving him this treat . . . but he was never meant to be a husband . . . how Pol would have laughed to think of Francis proposing to her . . . he would have sung some mocking little song in that lovely *mezza voce* of his . . . but all the same Pol like Francis had believed that if he had met her twenty years earlier he would have made a Taglioni of her . . . well, that was one delusion poor Edouard had been spared . . . and Edouard had given her Blanche and Bianca . . . did either of them yet regret that she had married, regret that she lived in a house at Highgate or a house at Hornsey, regret that she had married tennis-playing Bill or golf-playing Dick? . . . after all they must have temperament . . . she had seen so little of Blanche and Bianca these last five years . . . they were twenty-seven now, and a woman began to wonder at

twenty-seven if she would be able to say before she was thirty-five that she had had the best life could give her . . . oh, but it was her own vanity which had been disappointed by their not becoming wonders of the world . . . they were good girls, and their religion meant much to them . . . that was far more important than making a *furore* as the Rita Sisters . . . it would be lovely to be back in London . . . it was an omen of her happiness there that Lucy and Gladys should have come to Paris suddenly like this. . . . Paris was beautiful in May with the chestnut blossoms, but London was just as beautiful . . . Lucy had told her it was easy enough to drive a car . . . should she ever have the nerve to drive herself? . . . it would be fun driving up to Highgate or Hornsey . . . and yet for a while it would be more fun to go by the Tube as once upon a time years ago . . . more than forty years since she had first gone to Madame Aldavini's school . . . forty-two years ago . . . 1891 . . . and less than forty years before that her grandfather had had to escape from Italy to avoid being shot by the Austrians . . . if you went jumping back forty years at a time you were in the dark ages very quickly . . . and yet forty years was so short a time when it had gone by . . . but if she had ever loved somebody passionately it might have seemed even shorter still.

“What I ought to have done last year was to try and get made *sous-maîtresse de ballet* at the Opéra when the post was vacant.”

Rita for the remainder of her dressing was picturing herself in a room away in the recesses of that vast building, a room with a print or two of Taglioni and Cerito and perhaps a photograph of Karsavina, but not of Pavlova, who was a great showwoman but not really a great dancer. There would be a table on which would stand a model of the scene for the ballet in *Faust* or *Samson and Delilah* or the Venusberg. And there would

be a sofa covered with crimson on which would be flung two or three dresses for her criticism. And two or three pairs of ballet-shoes would be hanging on the wall, so that when it was necessary to show a girl some step at a private lecture on her incompetency she should be able to put on a pair herself and demonstrate in person how it ought to be done. She might have gone on working in such a room for nearly twenty years longer. Aldavini had taught until she was over seventy. But what nonsense! Only a few days ago she had been telling Lucy and Gladys that she did not want to teach dancing any more. And that was the truth. It was nothing more than a sentimental pang at leaving Paris which was making her regret for the moment that she had not got herself appointed *sous-maitresse* of the ballet at the Opéra. And if she wished to stay in Paris Francis Wilmot had given her the opportunity. She had only to put her hand upon his arm as they came out of Prunier's an hour or so hence and say, "Francis, I think I will marry you," and she could have what apartment in Paris she wanted. But no, no, another marriage would be only another perpetual reminder of what she had missed from life. What she had gained lay before her to be enjoyed in London.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MARGERY SEYMOUR

ON the steamer between Boulogne and Folkestone, Lucy came along to where Rita and Gladys were leaning back in deck chairs in that attitude of patiently awaiting the worst, which is characteristic of the traveller prone to sea-sickness. That it was a sparkling May day with no more movement in the sea than would take the oiliness out of it was no guarantee to either woman of an agreeable voyage. The light May breeze from the north-west assumed for Rita and Gladys the size of a hurricane, owing to the speed of the packet. Gladys had been sick on the voyage over when the crossing had been roughish. That had been enough to convince her that she would always be sick at sea. Rita had come to this conclusion many years previously.

“Who *do* you think’s on board?” Lucy asked, in obvious excitement.

“I don’t know,” Gladys replied faintly.

“I don’t care,” Rita murmured even more faintly.

“Margery Seymour! I do call that strange. I call that really extraordinary. Half of the first line of boys at the Orient all on a Channel steamer twenty years afterwards.”

“They won’t be never . . . ever again, once I get back on to dry land,” declared Gladys in a voice which not even extreme feebleness of utterance could deprive of expressing an evidently heartfelt determination.

“You *are* silly to give way like that, Gladys. Why, it’s lovely and smooth. Everybody except you and Rita are walking about the deck as jolly as anything.”

Gladys gulped.

"You'll swallow yourself in a minute," Lucy prophesied sternly. "And then you *will* be sick. Why don't you get up and walk about with me and have a squint at Mrs. Orchardson-Browne and her mother who looks like a picture chalked on the pavement by a one-armed cripple. Her face has been spread over with salmon and shrimp paste, *I* should say."

Gladys gulped again and tried with a limp hand to wave Lucy away.

"She's often over in France," said Rita. "Her brother has a small training-stable at Chantilly. He gave up boxing after he came out of the army because he got too fat."

"Well, *I* thought it was a very strange coincidence," said Lucy with a hint of huffiness in her tone. "But you two fade-outs don't seem very interested. Shall I get you some brandy, Gladys?"

"No thanks, dear. I'll be all right if I'm left alone till we get to England."

"Well, you can see the cliffs quite plain now. They look like a lot of washing on a line."

Lucy left her companions to their deck-chairs and strolled along the deck to have another look at Mrs. Orchardson-Browne and her mother. This time she ran into Margery who recognized her immediately.

"Lucy! I say how topping to meet you like this. And what an extraordinary coincidence, my dear. Do you know, only just before mothah and I left for Chantilly I was talking about you. I'll tell you what about in a minute. Do come and say how-do to my mothah. She's sitting in the shelter of a ventilator on the upper deck. How *are* you after all these yeeahs and yeeahs since we met?"

"Oh, I'm quite all right," Lucy replied with a certain amount of reserve in her manner, for she was

remembering what she had said about coincidence a few minutes back and in disapproving of Margery's gush disapproving of her own previous excitement.

"You're looking most awfully well. And you know, we're both of us getting on for forty. Isn't it frightful?"

"I'm forty, and you're forty-one, Margery."

"No, I'm thirty-eight, Lucy. I was eighteen when I was in Austria the year before the war."

"Well, you must have left three years behind you on the luggage rack in the train out."

"You're just as big a tease as you always were," Margery laughed. "But do come and say how-do to mothah. We've been staying with my brothah Jack at Chantilly. You remember him?"

"What there was of him. Of course I do."

"He had to give up boxing after the war. He found he was putting on weight too fast. But he was lucky enough to get hold of a very nice little stable, and he's done awfully well. He has such a promising string just now. In fact, tell it not in Gath, but we're hoping for the Grand Prix."

"Well, we're not going to Gath this summer, so you can hope away in peace, Mrs. Orchardson-Browne."

"I know. Isn't it a frightful mouthful?"

"Yes, I wonder you don't cut a piece off your name the same as you did off your age."

"You really are a frightful tease, Lucy. But don't say anything like that in front of mothah. She's getting awfully touchy about her age. I think when you get near to sixty you do. And she's really marvellous, Lucy. Not a single grey hair yet. In fact some people might think she dyed it."

"What an imagination some people have got, haven't they?" said Lucy, twinkling.

"Lucy, you're incorrigible. You really are."

"Still reading Shakespeare, I see."

By this time they were approaching Mrs. Seymour. So warm was the sunshine in her sheltered seat that she had taken off her hat, and her venerable yellow hairs were an object of much curiosity on the part of a small boy pacing the deck with his nurse, to whom he kept whispering innumerable questions to her evident embarrassment.

"I've met a very old friend, mothah," Margery was proclaiming, her deedy smoke-grey eyes darting about as of yore to notice if her words were creating an impression on the bystanders.

"Here, don't you give *me* those years you lost," said Lucy, nudging her.

"This is Mrs. Manning, mothah. Isn't it too extraordinary meeting her like this on the boat? You remember I was talking about her just before we left and saying that I was going to write and ask her if she would be kind enough to ask her boy to give Wilfred a helping hand when he goes to Rugby next September. I expect you're wondering how I knew your boy was at Rugby, Lucy. But it was Mrs. Hetherington who told me. She's a great friend of yours, isn't she?"

"She blows into our house sometimes," Lucy admitted.

"How d'ye do, Mrs. Manning," came in such a deep dignified boom from Mrs. Seymour that the small boy who had been staring at her in such fascination looked round to see if the voice came from the ventilator itself.

"I thought it was a loud-speaker, Nannie," he gurgled in that ecstatic enjoyment of one's own self-deception which is one of the privileges of childhood that age misses most.

"Do sit down and give me the pleasure of a little talk. I've always heard a great deal about you from Margery. But living as we do down in Hampshire, so many old ties have been broken. And Margery is kept so busy with

her family. Her two eldest boys are at Eton, but we thought it a mistake to have three Orchardson-Brownes there at the same time, and so Wilfred is to go to Rugby. How many children have you? Only three? Margery has five—three boys and two girls. What a pity the Major isn't with us. He would so much have enjoyed meeting you. But you know what a busy life a landed proprietor leads in these strenuous and overtaxed days. I often wish some of these wretched socialist agitators could own a bit of land themselves, and then we should hear less of the idle landed classes. I expect Margery has told you that we've been over to Chantilly to see my son. I wonder if you remember him in the far-off days before the war?"

"Rather. We used to call him the Mighty Atom, or Jack the Giant Killer, because he was always so fond of the big show girls in the Orient ballet."

Mrs. Seymour winced.

"And have you been in Paris?"

"Yes, I was over seeing Madame Mesnil, who used to be Rita Vitali. She was in the ballet too."

"Yes, we have met Madame Mesnil. Her husband was a sad loss. Such a charming singer. Did you ever hear him, Mrs. Manning?"

"We had a record of him, but it was made a long time ago and it's rather scratched."

"Quite. Quite."

"Rita is travelling over with us. She's going to live in London again."

"Is Mr. Manning with you. . . . I hope I'm right in calling him Mr. Manning?"

"You can call him Terence if you like."

Mrs. Seymour laughed with condescension.

"I was wondering if he had kept his military rank."

"No, he's quite sane again now. But he isn't with

me this cruise. I came over with another girl from the old Orient ballet—Gladys West. You remember her, Margery?"

"Oh yes, I think I remember her. Wasn't she engaged to a baron somebody?"

"A baron?" put in Mrs. Seymour fruitily. "Is she a baroness now?"

"No, he chucked her after twenty years and married a widow."

"Poor woman, she must have felt it very much," said Mrs. Seymour.

"Not half as much as she's feeling what she thinks is the motion of this boat. She and Rita are on the deck below, leaning back in their chairs and gulping one against the other."

"Sea-sickness is a most distressing thing," Mrs. Seymour proclaimed. "Fortunately I never suffer from it. Perhaps it is because I did a great deal of yachting in my younger days. Several friends of ours had private yachts, and that of course was an extremely enjoyable way of seeing the world. Nowadays Tom, Dick and Harry go cruising. Everything is being cheapened and vulgarized. Oh well, well," she sighed. "I suppose we must all face the fact that the world is changing. And how is Lady Emily, Mrs. Manning?"

"She's quite all right."

"Her father Lord Lisgar was a most delightful man. Of the old school, you know. Of course you never saw him. How sad that the title became extinct when he died. I always say that nothing upsets me so much as the loss of one of our historic names. My son-in-law, Major Orchardson-Browne, often comments on it. He often says that I seem to take the dying out of an old title as a personal loss. You've not met my son-in-law, I don't think. A charming man. Just a plain bluff country squire to the outer world, but such a cultured

man in his own intimate circle. He's a great novel-reader."

"Like Gladys West," said Lucy.

"Oh, really? . . . oh, yes . . . but of course my son-in-law does not approve of the trashy modern novel. He reads Scott and Harrison Ainsworth and Lytton, in fact I suppose what one would call the classics. He's particularly fond of Harrison Ainsworth. He says that in his opinion anybody can learn more English history from one novel of Harrison Ainsworth than from half a dozen history books."

"I'm afraid I find Harrison Ainsworth rather dry," Mrs. Orchardson-Browne confessed, with a suggestion in her tone that she was being pretty audacious in making such a confession.

"Yes, well, Margiekins, but you must remember that dear Geoffrey likes good solid reading. And those of us who are more frivolous must remember that to people like Geoffrey a book by a great writer like Harrison Ainsworth or Lord Lytton is not at all dry. And you must remember too, darling, that you are not very fond of reading at all. You prefer the wireless. Now I dote on a good book. I'm reading a most interesting book at present. I can't just think of the name at the moment, but it's about . . . how stupid of me to forget its name, and I have been reading it for a few minutes every night before going to sleep for quite three weeks. I like a long book in which you can really lose yourself. What *is* it called? What a pity I can't remember! I should have liked you to read it, Mrs. Manning. I know you'd enjoy it as much as I have. Can't you remember the name of that book I've been reading, Margery? I left it behind at the Grange when we came away, don't you remember, and I missed it extremely. It was such a very soothing book. Never mind, the name has completely escaped me."

"Do you remember who it was by, mothah?"

Mrs. Seymour smoothed the venerable yellow locks from her thought-racked forehead.

"No, I'm afraid the author's name has escaped me too. Quite a well-known name too. Yes, I'm afraid my memory is not what it was, Mrs. Manning. Well, it's no use pretending that I'm not getting old."

Lucy could stand no more of it. She rose to take her leave.

"Must you go and rejoin your friends? Well, it has been a great pleasure to meet you. I'm going to give you one of Margery's cards. Because if you are ever near Hinton Grange it would be such a pleasure to give you a real Hinton welcome, as we call it. My son-in-law's place is between Basingstoke and Andover. Such lovely country, and in these days of motoring you might easily find yourself within visiting distance."

"And will your boy be kind to my Wilfred when he goes to Rugby next term?" Margery added. "Of course, I know the bigger boys haven't much time to spare for their juniors, but it would be so nice if he would just give him a friendly word at the start."

"And now I suppose I'll get the bird from Lucius," Lucy said to herself as she committed her son to a protégé.

"Quite well turned out," Mrs. Seymour commented to Margery when Lucy had vanished down the companion. "But I should think it must be rather a trial for poor Lady Emily to have such an unmistakably theatrical daughter-in-law. I could not help contrasting the two of you, Margery mine, and thinking *what a difference*."

"Oh well, mothah, I must say considering what she came from she's wonderful. Her father was a green-grocer."

"Yes, I remember. Quite fantastic, isn't it? And

this other woman . . . the baroness *manquée* . . . what was she?"

"Her mother just let rooms."

"A lodging-house keeper? Dear me! It's a pity poor little Lucy Manning hasn't managed to cut herself free from her old associates. It was just as well the other woman was feeling sea-sick. It would have been awkward if she had tried to push herself on to us. Madame Mesnil perhaps is rather different. I wouldn't have minded meeting her again. I thought her quite ladylike. But when I look back to twenty years ago, how thankful I am that I was firm about your coming to Austria with me! I suppose I had an instinct that you would meet dear Geoffrey. And I'm so thankful that I saw at once that Geoffrey was madly in love with you when he got into conversation with us on that journey out to Vienna. You know, I often wonder if he would have had the courage to propose unless I had helped him with my advice when he was recovering from that wound. He was such a diffident boy. Well, what a perfect marriage it has turned out, hasn't it, darling?"

"Perfect, mumsy."

"My precious child."

The steamer hooted. They were coming into Folkestone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MAUDIE CHAPMAN

Two or three months before the father of Gladys had died Mrs. West had prudently bought as much ground in Brompton Cemetery as would contain the mortal remains of her husband and herself and their only daughter when death came to them. This grave already occupied by two-thirds of its population was visited once a fortnight by Gladys in order to place upon the simple tombstone a few fresh flowers in a crystal vase which her mother had highly esteemed while she was alive. The pious duty accomplished, it was the habit of Gladys when the weather was favourable to spend an hour or so strolling round the paths of the cemetery reading the epitaphs, and wondering at the ingenuity of sepulchral monuments. The place always reminded her of an enormous wedding cake, of which without philosophizing on birth and death she vaguely perceived the appropriateness. She was also much impressed by the waste of money involved. It occurred to her as it has occurred to many others that the people who required these elaborate temples and urns and weeping female figures to glorify their deaths must have felt extremely insecure of any posthumous attention to their lives.

It was during one of these meditative perambulations on a dulcet afternoon of early summer soon after getting home from Paris that Gladys stopped

to read the inscription on a small grave above the headstone of which was the sculptured bust of a little girl:

In Ever Loving Memory

of

IVY

The Only Child

of

JOHN ALBERT and MAUD CHAPMAN
who in the fifth year of her sweet young life
left for ever the home of her sorrowing parents
on

October 15th, 1884.

*Ivy! thy home is where each sound
Of revelry hath long been o'er;
Where song and beaker once went round,
But now are known no more.*

Felicia Hemans.

It was a moment or two before Gladys realized that this could not conceivably be the tomb of Maudie Chapman's Ivy; but this sharp reminder of a dead friend came with a shock, and when as was now her custom on these visits to her mother's grave she walked out by the southern gate of the cemetery to visit Lucy Manning in Cheyne Walk she was longing to communicate this shock to her.

Lucy agreed that the coincidence of names was strange; but she was by no means prepared to accept Gladys's theory that they ought to go and visit Maudie Chapman's grave in the Lancashire town of Blackford.

"What good will that do her when she's been dead practically ten years?"

"I thought we might put a wreath on her grave," Gladys suggested. "It would show she wasn't forgotten."

"Who's going to care in Blackford whether she's forgotten or not? And you don't suppose Maudie herself is worrying now? If we go on living in another world she'll have her Ivy, and if we don't. . . ." Lucy shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, I don't know. I thought it would be a nice thing to do."

"Yes, you think so, Gladys, because *you'd* enjoy it."

"You might as well say I visit mother's grave once a fortnight because I enjoy it."

"So you do."

"I like to pay a little attention, yes, but I do it more because I think that if mother can see what's happening on earth she'd be glad that her crystal vase has fresh flowers in it and she'd be glad that I haven't forgotten her."

"Well, your mother was very fond of you, and I daresay your father still gets on her nerves a bit even up above."

"Lucy, don't talk like that. It's awful to talk like that about the dead."

"I'm only going by what you've told me about your mother and your father. What I mean is your mother thought more of you than she did of anybody, and so I think you're right to fuss over her grave. But Maudie didn't care for anybody except her Ivy, and so if there's another world she must be spending all her time with *her*, and I should think by now she's forgotten where she is buried herself. Blackford must be a dog's island, or they wouldn't have such rotten panto companies there,

because poor old Maudie wouldn't have got an engagement in a *good* panto. She was well one of the has-beens when she fell in front of that tram. Yes, we shouldn't half look potty, should we, trailing all over a place like Blackford with a wreath and gazing about for Maudie's grave? Why they'd ask us where the rest of the circus was."

"I think you're very hard-hearted."

"Am I? I don't think so then. I think Maudie would sooner we talked about what a lad she was once upon a time before she married instead of putting a wreath on her grave, and which will only lie there and turn black with the smoke of the factories. It isn't being hard-hearted not to be soppy. If I was killed next time I drove out in my car . . ."

"Oh, Lucy, don't say such things."

"All right, all right, I'm still here, duckie. But if I *was* killed I wouldn't want you to come mooning round my grave with flowers. I'd sooner you and Rita had dined together somewhere and got just enough lit up for you to be able to stop giggling, and talked about the time we went to Paris together, or Margery Seymour and Mothah growing old backwards, or the time you and me went to Paddington to be photographed and I lost my trousers, or the time Maudie Chapman and Madge Wilson pushed me outside the dressing-room without a stitch just before the call-boy was coming round and held the door so as I couldn't get back, or the night I threw a snowball at that fellow waiting in the court, all dressed up to kill in a fur-coat and opera hat, and it melted down his neck and he turned round in a rage and said, 'You b——ah!' Oh, that did make me laugh! I thought that was really funny. And just then Margery Seymour came bobbing out from the stage-door and I said, 'Your brothah isn't waiting for you to-night, but he's sent a gentleman friend who's just called me a b——ah.' And

of course Mrs. Shakespeare would have something to say about disgusting language, and then I *would* start. What a little lady I was! I used to make your ears curl sometimes, Gladys."

"I know."

"Oh well, it made you feel superior, and you liked that. I remember once I started a swearing competition with Ada Hilton, who was in the first line of girls. I brought her in to Room 45 just to annoy you and Margery, and you said you'd report our language to the management, and how we all laughed! I can hear Maudie Chapman's laugh now. And that brings me nearer to her than putting flowers on her grave. I reckon Maudie won't come down to take her call now, no matter how many bouquets we send round for her. Talking of bouquets, I was asking Rita the other day if she remembered the bouquet Madge Wilson had on the first night of that flash revue which was going to be so marvellous and which we thought was the rottenest show we'd ever seen."

"It wasn't so bad," Gladys protested.

"Yes, you were in it. You weren't sitting in front like Rita and I. But do you remember that bouquet Madge Wilson was given? Oh, it was really ridiculous. 'Oo-er,' I said to Rita, 'there's half Covent Garden being handed up on the stage.' And this waggon-load of flowers was for Madge! After giving the rottenest performance anybody could think of!"

"Yes, I remember she had a lot of flowers."

"Of course she did. Bertold thought he could make her Gertie Millar the Second by emptying daisies over her. I wonder where Madge Wilson is now. Why don't you and me and Rita go and see if her mother still has that shop? We might find out where she is. She got her head turned by Bertold, but there

was something I liked about her when she came down to earth."

So a week or so after this Rita and Gladys were driven by Lucy to the New Kent Road. The shop no longer existed; it was now a fried fish restaurant. They asked the new proprietor if he could tell them where his predecessor was; but he had never seen her and knew nothing about her. He did not even know her name. The place was empty when he took it over seven years ago.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MADGE WILSON

A YEAR before the war, in one of the southern counties there stretched between a great woodland of oak and ash mingling with mighty beechen groves and a grass-grown hedgeless road a considerable space of rough pasturage dotted with ancient thorn-trees equally lovely whether they were clouded with heavy-scented blossom or glowing with red haws. During the war the woodland was razed. Immediately after the war the road was widened and macadamized. Motorists began to use it, grateful for the mile it saved them. The owner of the pasturage disposed of it to a company interested in land development. It was cut up into lots and sold at a handsome profit to various townsick idealists who erected small bungalows of corrugated iron, replaced the ancient thorn-trees with hen-houses, put up a quantity of wire-netting, and hung cards in their windows with the word TEAS upon them. The population of this settlement was hardly more stable than a camp of tinkers; but the supply of townsick idealists seemed inexhaustible, and as soon as one of them had discovered that chicken-keeping on a small scale did not pay and that motorists never stopped to take tea another would come along, relieve him of his responsibility, learn his own lesson, and find his own dupe when he in turn was compelled to surrender his hope of living on the land.

To one of these bungalows, the fourth in the succession of ownership, had come a couple of years before the June when Mrs. Wilson's shop was found to have vanished a large flabby man called Fred Barlow, his wife

and his wife's mother who became bedridden within six months of her arrival. Fred Barlow liked to describe himself as an Old Hardboiled Colonial, and inasmuch as during his twenties and thirties he had failed to establish himself in Australia, New Zealand, British Columbia, Canada, or South Africa he was perhaps entitled to claim to two-thirds of the description. To the adjective 'hard-boiled' he was definitely not entitled, either morally, mentally, or physically. It was indeed one of those epithets which a weak man will give himself in the hope that nature will imitate art. He was credulous, untruthful, weak, futile, lazy, and sentimental; but his ability to create a favourable first impression was so well sustained that he always succeeded in finding a job, although he never succeeded in keeping one. He also had the inestimable advantage of possessing a small annuity which his father had directed to be bought for him instead of leaving him the capital to squander. The income did not exceed two hundred pounds a year; but it was quite enough to avert the starvation which must have been his end without it, for he was now over fifty and in spite of the glib presentation of his own talents he was bound sooner or later to fail to find a job.

Five years before the summer of 1933 Madge Wilson, after a full and unusually varied experience of men and countries, had returned to England from touring round Malaya in a fit-up musical comedy company to find Mrs. Wilson out of her shop in the New Kent Road and installed as a most unwelcome guest in the house of her brother, a disagreeable man with a tobacconist's shop in an East London suburb. He would have had no hesitation whatever in letting her go into the workhouse, but his wife was a personage in some small and obscure sect which, in the manner of small and obscure sects, had discovered for themselves a method of exclusive salvation, and Mrs. Nixon dreaded the social disgrace of

having a sister-in-law in the workhouse. So Mrs. Wilson had been accommodated with a room in her brother's house, and for two years had eaten the bread of a resentful charity, the ill-will of which she repaid by pricing very low every article in the Nixon household.

"That occasional table, George," she would observe calmly, "which you seem to think is worth a bit of money wouldn't fetch five shillings at a sale. And in fact you'd be lucky if you got a bid of four. I wouldn't offer more than three and six, or three and nine at most for it, myself. It isn't real walnut. Just veneer. If I was to run my finger-nail across it you'd see what a gimcrack affair it is. And that hat-stand of yours. Well, I've seen better hat-stands than that given away at sales to anybody who'd pay for a barrow to take them off the premises."

And in the middle of tea, when her brother and her sister-in-law were watching every gulp she took with an exasperation that was very near to hatred, Mrs. Wilson might pick up a plate and declare that she'd seen six such plates go for threepence with a couple of chambers thrown in.

So when Madge came back to England and offered to relieve her Uncle George and Aunt Marie of her mother, Uncle George and Aunt Marie were delighted. Madge was then thirty-eight, but in spite of a plumpness that was beginning to be something more than plumpness she could still pass for five years younger, thanks to a judicious use of make-up and the expenditure of time and trouble over her pretty fair hair and a generous allowance of camomile shampoos. Nevertheless, she made up her mind that her attractiveness for men must henceforth be concentrated on welding more solid bonds than she had hitherto thought worth while. Therefore when, at the boarding-house in Southend to which she took Mrs. Wilson for a fortnight's holiday to recover from the two years she had spent with her brother and

sister-in-law, she found herself an object of interest to a large flabby man with a heavy moustache, who wore Bedford cord riding-breeches, a blue serge jacket and a Stetson hat, she made up her mind to make herself necessary to his happiness. She was much helped by the fact that he was not in the least necessary to hers. Madge had always found it difficult to resist the immediate gratification of her fancy for any man, once she had escaped from Bertold's tyranny, and if Fred Barlow had charmed her wayward eye she would not have bothered about marriage.

Statistics are wanting to ascertain for how many proposals of marriage the length of Southend Pier has been responsible, but the number must be considerable. A woman who walks from one end of that pier to the other with a man whose interest she has aroused and does not succeed, material hindrances being absent, in wringing a proposal out of him before the pavilion is reached, does not deserve the name of woman. A man must face up to the future when he is walking along Southend Pier with a woman. He cannot follow a woman through the turnstile, in itself a particularly fateful method of entry because it does not allow jibbing, without realizing that, even if he fends her off until the pavilion, he cannot hope to walk back the whole length of that pier in an immunity of small talk.

Where so many had succumbed it was not likely Fred Barlow would survive.

"What a way this pier stretches in front of you, doesn't it, Mr. Barlow?" Madge observed. "And so empty. Hardly anybody walking on it."

"Ah, that's because the season is over," Mr. Barlow explained. "It was packed in August when I was managing that little Wild West show we were running down here."

"I used to be in a turn once with a fellow who did a

Wild West act. Syd Hurley. Did you ever hear of him?"

"Can't say I did. But you meet a lot of these snide cowboys who never reached nearer to the real West than the Uxbridge Road. Mind you I'm not saying a word against this friend of yours, but you've got to remember that I'm an Old Hardboiled Colonial, Miss Wilson, and try and put up with my downright manner of speaking."

"Well, he had an American accent, and he was very good with a lassoo. It was a very successful turn. He used to shoot the pips out of a five of clubs which I held up for him."

"He wouldn't have had to know anything about the great open spaces beyond the setting sun to shoot pips out of a five of clubs. He could learn to do that in a back yard."

"Oh, the pier *is* empty, isn't it?" Madge exclaimed again. "And it looks miles to the other end."

Mr. Barlow smiled in amiable condescension.

"Yes, I daresay it looks a long way to you, Miss Wilson. But I've ridden for days at a stretch when you could see nothing except the sky and the rolling prairie and I didn't have a nice little woman beside me for company, what's more."

Madge's eyes narrowed.

"I wonder you like to live on your own the way you do," she observed.

"Nice little women aren't so easy to come by in this wicked world. When I was a tenderfoot right up against Things, a girl way back in England couldn't wait for her man to make good. She married his best friend. It made a fellow like me a bit shy of women, that did, because though I'm only an Old Hardboiled Colonial, Miss Wilson, I feel Things pretty deep."

Madge's hot blue eyes, not faded yet, narrowed still further.

"Yes, you say you feel things, but *I* wouldn't say you felt things so much."

"Now look here, little woman, what makes you pass a remark like that?"

"Perhaps I don't believe in men any more than you believe in women."

"Then you wouldn't believe me if I was to tell you this last fortnight at Bella Vista has been the happiest fortnight I've spent for years?"

Madge looked sceptical.

"Perhaps you wouldn't believe me if I was to tell you it was on account of a little woman with eyes like forget-me-nots I'd been so happy?"

Madge looked back over her shoulder. They were now half-way between the turnstile and the pavilion. A wilderness of planking stretched in every direction.

"No, I wouldn't," she snapped. "And if you're trying to make a fool of me like that I shall turn round and go home."

Fred Barlow looked about him to calculate the distance between them and anything except the mud underneath the pier. The amiable condescension with which he had smiled at the notion of considering Southend Pier one of the great open spaces of the earth was beginning to seem almost reckless. If she did turn round and make for the entrance it would be a long way to walk under a misunderstanding. If she turned round and made for the entrance, and he should keep his course for the pavilion it would mean an end to those jolly little strolls he had been enjoying with Blue Eyes on the front after high tea; indeed, it would mean an end of everything that was making this fine autumn weather seem so much finer. A woman might have a tiff with a man at the corner of a street, flounce off, and forgive him next day; but no woman was going to walk half the length of Southend Pier in one direction while a man walked half

the length of it in another without cherishing against that man an incurable resentment for the rest of her life.

"I wasn't trying to make a fool of you, little woman," he pleaded. "I haven't spent most of my days under God's skies to come back to the Old Country and try to make a fool of any woman, least of all you, Madge. If you'd only had a bit of patience, I was just going to ask you if you could bring yourself to put up for good and all with an Old Hardboiled Colonial like me. I can't offer you much, Madgie, but I've rode straight and shot straight and lived straight since I trekked out of England as a boy of nineteen, and I've got an annuity of two hundred pounds a year which will keep the big bad wolf from the door and give me enough to pay the premiums on a life-policy which will come to you when I outspan for the last time."

"When you do what?"

"Now, girlie, I thought you'd trekked around South Africa filming. You ought to know that expression. But if you like it better I'll say when I die."

"That's a nice gloomy thing to talk about on a fine day like this."

"Do you still think I'm trying to make a fool of you, little woman?"

"Do you really mean you want us to get married?"

"Of course I do, Madge. What did you think I meant?"

"Well, you're so fond of throwing words about, I wasn't sure. Still, if you really mean it, all right, I'll marry you."

For one moment Fred Barlow felt Southend Pier was shrinking so rapidly that he would be squashed between the turnstiles and the pavilion; but another look at Madge reassured him. She was plump and pretty, and he would have somebody to listen to his stories. He

put an arm round her waist, and drew her onward to the still distant pavilion.

After three years of marriage, during which time Madge had been exasperated by her husband's big talk and slight achievement, Fred Barlow won six hundred pounds in a football pool. Fortunately, this unexpected influx of wealth coincided with a dream in which Fred Barlow had recently been indulging of retiring somewhere into the country to lead the simple life, and Madge who was getting anxious about her mother's health for the first time encouraged one of her husband's dreams. To spend the six hundred pounds in the purchase of a small chicken farm and a corrugated iron bungalow seemed to her the safest investment he could make. If like so many of Fred's schemes it turned out worthless as a money maker, he would always have his annuity and without rent to pay he would be sure of keeping up the premiums on that life-policy. Madge had had a lesson from what had happened to her mother. She did not want to find herself in old age a dependent on people like Uncle George and Aunt Marie.

To many women that existence in an untidy little settlement of tin bungalows with a distant view indeed of a pleasant countryside, but immediately surrounded by washing, wire-netting, wandering fowls, and badly erected aerials would have seemed as melancholy as the grudging charity of relatives. Madge, however, did not mind it, for she had never hitherto been able to give way so completely to her natural indolence. As a little girl she had had to go to dancing classes. At the Orient she had had to get up for rehearsals. Cinema work had been a continuous trial to her laziness. The first three years of marriage to Fred Barlow had involved a great deal of moving about from one job to another. Beyond having to attend to her bedridden mother and cook an occasional meal she now had nothing to do, for she

made her husband do most of the cooking, all the washing up, and all the work of looking after the fowls. A bus took her in twice a week to the talkies. The wireless was easily turned on. A paper-bound novelette put no strain upon the wrists. Two or three of the youths in the settlement were willing to run errands for her and do odd jobs in the hope that the rumour of her being hot stuff might prove true. The admiration of these youths provided just enough stimulus to keep her pretty hair neat, but not enough to make herself uncomfortable with too many new corsets. By goading her husband into shaving off his huge moustache she had clinched an ascendancy over him which had never really been threatened. If he talked too much, she boosted up the wireless. If he suggested conjugal privileges, she yawned, and as his vigour was not remarkable a yawn was usually enough to discourage it. If he persisted, she laughed at him, and that never failed. She smoked a good many cigarettes; but beyond an occasional Guinness when she went to the talkies she did not drink. She had enjoyed, as has been said, a varied experience of countries and men; but on this she seldom reflected. In retrospect her past appeared excessively restless, and she had no desire whatever to go back to it in mind or body. Her mother, although bedridden, had kept all her faculties, and she could always lend an ear when Madge felt inclined for a little backbiting, which nowadays did not extend beyond the domestic incompetency of her husband, for she could never bother to become sufficiently intimate with any of her female neighbours to make the pulling to pieces of their characters amusing. Any regrets for lost opportunities were easily assuaged by attributing her failure to get anywhere in particular to her own lack of energy. She could have, if she had wanted to. That was good enough for anybody. The nearest she came to repining was over her stupidity in

not obtaining a settlement from Bertold Krebs. Her awe of Bertold had been so much weakened by many subsequent liaisons that she now believed firmly in her quondam sway over him, and he too had become one of her "could haves if she had wanted to." She was in fact content.

None of her old companions in the first line of boys ever discovered Madge Wilson's retreat. The nearest to doing so were Lucy Arnold and Gladys West, in that summer twenty years after this figure of eight began to be traced, when in a car they actually drove past the settlement of tin bungalows and chicken coops one hot July afternoon on their way to one of the south-coast watering-places. It was Gladys who caught sight of the word TEAS and suggested to Lucy that they might stop the car and refresh themselves with a cup.

"Have tea in that heap of old biscuit tins?" Lucy exclaimed. "I reckon if they put up a card with FLEAS it would be nearer the truth. Besides, we only had lunch about an hour ago."

"I think a nice cup of tea's so refreshing on a hot afternoon," Gladys murmured apologetically.

"Well, I like my tea," Lucy admitted. "But not among a lot of old iron. Don't look so depressed, auntie. We'll stop at the first full-size inn and you shall have all the tea you want."

"Yes, it was rather an untidy-looking place."

"Untidy-looking? Why, it was absolutely filthy."

It happened that just as Lucy and Gladys were driving past the settlement Madge was saying to her mother that perhaps it might have been better if Fred had invested the money he won in the pool in another second-hand furniture business.

"Nonsense," the old lady snapped. "Who'd have done the buying? Or the selling if it comes to that?"

"I think Fred might have done the selling all right," Madge argued. "He still talks a lot."

"You can't sell if you can't buy. I know the kind of rubbish Fred would have bought. Stuffed animals and birds, and leaky aquariums. No, you're better as you are, Madge. Besides, with all this instalment business there's no second-hand furniture left. Any-one's only got to breathe a bit heavy and it falls to pieces before the last instalment is paid let alone lasts long enough to get into the second-hand market. And people nowadays don't like a nice solid bit of mahogany. Chubes. That's the latest. Steel chubes to sit on. There's no second-hand market for steel chubes. I remember I had a trombone once cluttering up the shop two years before I could sell it. Hardly a dint on it there wasn't. A lovely instrument. But not to sit on. Yes, now people have started in getting up their dressing-rooms like W.C.s, I feel thankful I was sold up when I was. No, you're better where you are, Madge. Turn on the wireless. It's all a lot of nonsense they put on this wireless, but it shows there's something going on somewhere."

"It's a symphony concert, mother, and you don't like them."

"No, I don't, but I don't like the noise the fowls have been making all the afternoon, clucking round the back door, and the one'll drown the other."

Madge turned on the wireless, lighted a cigarette, and opened a novelette.

"Do you remember Ireen Dale, mother?"

"A bit. A fast young hussy, wasn't she?"

Madge held up the novelette.

"The girl on the front of this reminds me of Ireen. The same lovely chestnut hair and rosy complexion. And she had a dimple in her chin too."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IRENE DALE

ON the left side of the Highgate Road between Gospel Oak and Kentish Town the passer-by might have observed as late as this summer of 1933 five tall dark narrow houses standing well back from the traffic behind a square of thin discoloured grass in which a few miserable shrubs still struggled to be evergreen. Building development had destroyed the blocks on either side, but as yet had not replaced them with new edifices, and as the land behind them stretched away in an open waste of railway lines and engine sheds this row of five, which had hitherto escaped the housebreaker, stood out like a great gaunt scarecrow against the naked sky. Four of the houses were fully occupied by swarming families of poor people; but the fifth was apparently empty, and its air of desolation was intensified by its being at the end of the row, because the outer wall was still partially plastered and papered with all that was left of the house next to it, which had already been pulled down. Actually this fifth house was not empty, for the owners, probably to maintain for legal or commercial reasons some pretence of occupation, had installed in it at a nominal rent a family. This family lived in the basement entirely below the level of the pavement and consisted of a mother and two daughters—in fact of Mrs. Dale and her two daughters, Winnie and Irene. Benjamin Dale, the ex-pilot, had died three years before, and Ethel, the youngest girl, had mercifully died very soon after the Dales had moved from Stacpoole Terrace to Drury Lane, for what

had been hopefully considered a curable case of arrested development had ended in utter imbecility.

The prophecy of Jenny Pearl that Irene Dale would wind up her career as a dirty old woman in a basement with a red petticoat and a halfpenny dip and a quatern of gin seemed likely to be almost completely fulfilled. She was not yet an old woman, but already in her late forties her figure was so blowsily fat, her face so swollen by drink, her hands and arms so coarsened by rough work, her clothes so slatternly that she seemed at least ten years older, and to such a state was she by now reduced it was impossible to suppose but that the years of her life to come would fatten and coarsen and degrade her further. She was in the basement. The quatern of gin was by her side whenever a day's charring brought her the wherewithal to provide it. The red petticoat and the halfpenny dip she might escape, not so much by her own virtues as by the inexorable march of material progress which had introduced aniline dyes and artificial silk for cheap knickers and extended so widely the use of electric light. Irene's elder sister, who twenty years ago was an overblown red rose, was now at fifty a sprawling red cabbage.

The two women sat on either side of a grate from which the ashes had not been raked since the last fire was lit in it on a cold night in May, two months previously. Between them on a three-legged stool were a jug of draught stout and a couple of glasses. Work had been scarce for a month, and so there was no money for gin. The western sun was shining low across the wilderness of railway-lines and engine sheds and illuminating every corner of this basement room, which except for an hour or two on summer evenings was a place of shadows, the wretched disarray of which was usually less obtrusive. The unmade bed in the corner, the unwashed dishes upon the table, the unswept square of oilcloth on the floor,

the huddle of frowsy underclothes on top of a chest of drawers without handles and therefore giving too much trouble to open, the bedraggled skirts hanging upon the peg of the door, the geranium in the window dead for lack of water, the wash-basin half full of soapy scum, the stubs of cigarettes among the spilt powder on the toilet-table, all took on an added squalor from those golden rays.

"Isn't that the old woman calling out?" asked Winnie.

"She never stops calling out," Irene muttered.

At last the fretful reiteration from the next room drove the younger woman to get up and answer it.

In contrast with the room where Winnie and Irene had been sitting the kitchen in the front basement was shadowy enough. The windows were close to the wall of the area, and the light was still further obscured by a large van which was standing in the roadway between the square and the pavement.

"How much longer have I got to holler before you can move your fat bottoms?" asked Mrs. Dale savagely, from her bed in the corner of the kitchen. "Can't you smell the onions burning in the pan, you lazy couple of cows? Yes, you'd like to stink me out of here if you could, swilling there in the next room and me . . ."

"Oh, shut your trap," said Irene sullenly, as she moved across to the gas-stove and lifted the reeking pan of onions.

The old woman's beady eyes glared malevolently at her younger daughter. While she was in bed with this rheumatism she could not drink her share, and it enraged her to think of the liquor in the next room.

"Anyone would think I enjoyed lying here with cramps all over me," she grumbled.

"Well, it isn't much of a game for us, is it?" Irene

asked. "And you'd better watch out and get better, because there's a notice come in this evening to say the rest of the houses here are going to be pulled down in September, and which means cramps or no cramps you'll have to shift."

"Where will we go?" the old lady asked, staggered out of her bad temper by the news.

"Well, it was you brought us down to live in this dirty hole. You'd better rattle your brainbox and find out. A cellar in the Dials I should think, the way we've been going down ever since we left Stacpoole Terrace."

"It wasn't my fault was it the pair of you got so fat you couldn't get a man to look at you?"

"After you and dad had drunk away all Winnie had and all Danby gave me."

"Oh no, you didn't drink nothing of it yourselves, did you?" the old woman sneered.

"And if we did we paid double for it, having to work like a couple of navvies to keep you and dad. If Winnie and me had left you both to it where would you have been? I suppose you think it's a glorious life, scrubbing all day on your knees to keep you and dad as well as ourselves."

"Isn't your father dead?"

"Yes, he always did have a bit less to say than you," Irene retorted. "Well, are you going to eat any of these onions you've been yapping about so much?"

"I want a glass of stout before I eat anything."

"Then, you'll have to want, because you won't get it."

"You —— cow," the old woman swore, her head pressed back with rage into the discoloured pillow.

Irene picked up the frying-pan and went back with it to the other room.

"Go on, you'd better take her in a glass of stout to wash out her mouth," she said to Winnie.

"Oh, my gawd, as sure as I sit down for a few minutes I've got to be fetching and carrying for her," Winnie grunted. "What a life!"

However, she dragged herself up from the chair, and shuffled off with the jug of stout to the kitchen.

Irene took her place by the ashes of that fire lit on a cold evening last May. The sunlight streaming through the window could not conjure for her hair the last glinting trace of that rich chestnut-brown of twenty years ago, nor incarnadine those cheeks with so much as a sodden petal of youth's roses. The cleft chin was clogged with fat. Even her intensely blue eyes time had diluted.

What would the girls in Room 45 say if they could see her now? She had been lucky to escape meeting any of them during these last ten years, and perhaps now not one of them would recognize her if she did meet them. The first line of boys. It was almost impossible to believe now that the first line of boys had ever existed.

"Winnie! Winnie!" she called.

"What do you want now?"

"I'm going out to get another jug of stout."

"Good job. There's not much left in the other since Ma got down to it."

Irene considered the fatigue of putting on a hat, and decided against it. She passed bareheaded from the radiance of the westering sun into the dimness of the passage reeking of burnt onions and thence up the steps of the area into the noise of the traffic in the Highgate Road and the screams of the children swarming round the railings of that square of thin pallid grass.

She turned back to look at the row of five tall dark narrow houses standing up against the sky like a gaunt scarecrow.

"And even that dog's island is going in September. Winnie and me will have to get a move on if we don't want to find ourselves sleeping in Trafalgar Square."

Irene slouched along to the nearest public-house, and turned in through the door marked JUGS AND BOTTLES.

POSTLUDE

POSTLUDE

THE figure of eight has been traced; but the pen lingers for a moment to record that upon this golden evening in July, when Irene Dale was slouching bareheaded to the nearest public-house, Terence Manning and his wife were walking along the flagged path of the small garden in front of their house to the taxi waiting for them in Cheyne Walk. The westering sun which had lighted up the basement room in Kentish Town was turning Battersea Reach to a stream of molten gold.

“Drive right along the Embankment as far as Westminster,” Terence directed the taximan, “and then go on to the Café Royal. Don’t drive too quickly. It won’t blow your hair about too much, dearest,” he added to Lucy, “if we have the hood down?”

Lucy made a grimace, and Terence was just about to tell the driver to put the hood up when she laid a quick hand on his arm.

“Don’t be silly. I don’t mind if it does.”

“Sure?”

“Positive.”

Terence took her hand when the taxi started.

“You’re feeling very affectionate this evening,” she said.

“How could I help it when I think of the date? Twenty years ago to-night when you and I first met.”

She pressed his hand to her side.

“I’m glad we did, because you’ve been a darling to me always, Terence.”

“I’d half thought of suggesting we should go up to

Cambridge for this celebration, and see about Lucius's rooms for next year. But on reflection I thought it was absurd to go to Cambridge to celebrate what is so essentially a London festival."

"I love London," she said. "It's not quite so nice as it used to be, but I love it all the same."

"I know one's inclined to think London isn't as nice, but I suppose some of that's due to our not being so young as we were. We think *we* feel just the same at forty as we felt ten years earlier, but that places and amusements are not so good as once upon a time. We won't admit that it's ourselves. I'm tremendously pleased you linked up again with Gladys West and Rita Mesnil. It has been good for you to get around with them."

"Yes, I'm glad I did. But when Lucius is finished with school I'll have to be about a lot with him."

"And as soon as he's finished at the Varsity there'll be Joan coming out, and right on her heels Margaret. What a busy old lady you'll be!"

"Well, if I can be like Rita twelve years from now I won't grumble. I think she's really marvellous. I went with her to see her two girls last week and as we were driving up the Highgate Road we saw a fat woman standing by the edge of the kerb waiting to cross over, and Rita and I both thought it was a girl called Irene Dale who used to be in the first line of boys with us. But she was looking so untidy and all to pieces that we thought if it was her she mightn't like for us to see her. So we didn't do anything about it. I wonder if it was her?"

"Quite possible."

"Oh, Terence, aren't I a lucky woman? And if it hadn't been for you . . . it's you who gave me my real chance. If I hadn't met you I might have gone to pieces."

"Nonsense, my dear. You would never have gone to pieces."

"Still, I wouldn't be happy like I am. Oh, Terence, you have been a darling to me."

"Lucy, my blessed one, I owe you far more than you owe me. Think what I might have become. A dull city dog with no hold on life at all."

They sat for awhile in silence while the taxi hummed along Chelsea Embankment. The sun was lighting up Battersea Park across the river, the water of which was no longer golden but a deep tranquil green with the reflected verdure.

"What did you think of Rita's girls?" Terence asked presently.

"Lovely to look at. But quite ordinary. Nothing of Rita's personality in them. She thinks they were marvellous on the stage, but I think it was just their youth and their beauty which made them such a rage at first. I think they behaved very wisely to marry like they did. And they've both got lovely kiddies."

"Suppose Joan or Margaret takes it into her head to want to go on the stage?"

"Well, I suppose if they do we'd have to say 'jolly good luck to you,' but I don't think they will. After all I wasn't really an actress. I'd been well taught as a dancer, yes, but I couldn't dance any better than lots of girls, and not so well as a good many who never got anywhere. Maudie Chapman and Queenie Danvers were both better dancers than me, and look what became of them. Irene Dale was better in some ways, and even if that wasn't her we saw the other day we know she never got anywhere. And Rita was twice as good as all the rest of us put together, but she never became a prima ballerina. No, I reckon to be a real success on the stage you've got to have something that none of

us had. And I'm sure neither Joan or Margaret have it. Still, if they want to try, jolly good luck to them, that's all I say."

"You may fancy yourself one of the crowd," Terence said to his wife, "but I can assure you that, when I saw you twenty-one years ago and fell in love with you at first sight from the other side of the footlights, you were the most exquisite, the most adorable . . ."

"Yes, to you," Lucy interrupted. "But not to the audience. You've got to make a whole audience feel like that before you can call yourself anybody on the stage."

The taxi was running along Grosvenor Road.

A minute or two later Lucy pointed to the stucco façade of 26 Alverton Street thrust forward like a stage-wing.

"That's where Maudie Chapman lived once. Perhaps I might have lived in a place like that if I hadn't met you, Terence."

"You're very determined on this twentieth anniversary of that most wonderful July day to turn me into a prince and yourself into a beggar-maid. Once for all, whatever I gave you, my precious, you gave me a thousand times more."

"Oh well, we love one another as much now as then, and that's all that really matters."

In a quick flood of emotion she leant her head upon his shoulder, regardless of the passers-by.

"You're sure you're not cold?"

"No, just loving you very much," she murmured.

When the taxi reached Piccadilly Circus Terence pointed to the Orient. "Revue didn't last as long as ballet," he said.

"You're right. Fancy the Orient a cinema. I don't think I *could* go and see a film there. I wonder what they'll do with all the dressing-rooms?"

"I shouldn't think it mattered by what you've told me about them."

"Yes, they were dogs' islands," Lucy agreed. "But they weren't empty like they must be now. Oh, well, what of it? Everything changes."

"Not everything," said Terence, taking her hand. After dining in the new grill-room of the *Café Royal* and wishing as they wished at every birthday dinner and every anniversary dinner and every wedding-day dinner that the old grill-room was still in existence they went to their club and danced; but when they were tired of dancing, instead of driving straight home, they walked through the summery streets toward the *Adelphi*.

"I suppose your parents wouldn't be up now?" Terence suggested when they passed through the archway into *Goldbeater Alley*.

"Don't be silly. Now they feel they're beginning to get old they go to bed at ten every night."

They stood for a while looking up at the house above *Samuel Arnold's* shop, at the window of the room where Lucy had slept for nearly half the years of her life. The wicker cage which used to hang between it and the window next door was no longer hanging there.

"I suppose the blackbird's dead," Terence sighed.

"I don't know, but the old girl next door who it belonged to died ten years ago, and the cage hasn't been there since we got back from Australia. You have gone back into the past to-night."

"I don't know why, but that first night is somehow more vivid to me to-night than it has been at any of our anniversaries."

They walked on through the alley and down the steps under the lamp.

"Here's where you kissed me first," he said. "You turned back on a sudden impulse. Do you remember? Kiss me again now."

"Mind, Terence, there's a bobby in Duke Street."

"Well, my dearest, no bobby has a right to stop a husband from kissing his wife of twenty years."

"But *he* won't think we've been married for twenty years."

"And could he pay the anniversary of our first kiss a more delightful compliment?"

They wandered on past the dark sedate Adam houses into Adelphi Terrace. Once again a group of Savages emerged from their club and went off laughing and talking round the corner. Once again a yellow half moon was hanging over the Surrey side of the Thames.

"Well, on that first night I walked all the way from here to the World's End along the Embankment, but I suppose you'll insist on our driving home in a taxi to-night," said Terence.

"What? I should say so! Why, I do believe you really would like to make me tramp the whole way to Cheyne Walk." She thumped him. "You silly middle-aged old thing. Well, I like that."

He laughed.

"We'll find a taxi by the District Railway Station."

They hardly spoke during the whole of the drive back along the river; but they sat hand in hand, old memories flashing across their minds, one after another, even as, one after another, the Embankment lamps lighted up for an instant the taxi in which they were driving home.

